

# **PATHWAYS OF PATHOLOGY AND PROMISE IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

by

Michael Colin Caulkins  
M.Sc., Arizona State University, 2004  
B.A., University of Colorado, 1998

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# APPROVAL

**Name:** Michael Colin Caulkins  
**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy  
**Title of Thesis:** Pathways of Pathology and Promise in Alternative Education

**Examining Committee:**

**Chair:** Dr. Michael Ling  
Senior Lecturer

---

**Dr. Sean Blenkinsop**  
Senior Supervisor  
Associate Professor

---

**Dr. Heesoon Bai**  
Supervisor  
Professor

---

**Dr. Vicki Kelly**  
Internal Examiner  
Assistant Professor

---

**Dr. Mary Breunig**  
External Examiner  
Assistant Professor  
Brock University

**Date Defended/Approved:**

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation investigates the ways that pathologization, deficit model thinking, and negative school labels (i.e., learning disabled, at-risk, problem behaviour) are given institutional life within the relationships between students, staff, administrators, and policy makers at various levels of the alternative education hierarchy in British Columbia, Canada. A qualitative case study research design was selected to provide flexibility in data collection, and methods used include interviews, program observation, document collection, and focus groups. Data was analyzed using a three-tiered process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Findings consist of a series of paradoxes in relationships operating on multiple levels of the alternative education system: between students and staff at an alternative program, and within the language and labels used by professionals working in managerial/administrative positions at the high school, alternative program, local school board, and provincial ministry of education. Educational professionals in the province are seen to accept and resist processes of youth marginalization, such as deficit model thinking and pathologization, within the alternative education system. These contradictions, suggested by Ivan Illich to be inherent to large, modern social institutions, imply deeper ideological problems within the educational endeavour and the society at large. Implications for the educational institution, educators and administrators, students, and alternative programs are

discussed in the final chapter, along with limitations and suggestions for future research.

**Keywords:** risk discourse; marginalized and labelled youth; alternative education; pathologization; deficit model thinking

## **DEDICATION**

To Sean and Heesoon, my steadfast mentors...

And to Nora, Bridger and Will, you are the ones who help me to be present and patient, and remembering what is most important in life.

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philosopher, often juggling several, if not all of these at once, reveal her to be deeply committed and attuned to those students/friends/family who are around her. Heesoon's partner, Avraham, was also constantly encouraging of me and my work, and our first meeting at Bo Kong, where I also first met Sean, is still memorable to me. Thanks so much, Heesoon and Avi!

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The students and former students who I met through AOP stand out as some of the most passionate and thoughtful individuals I have met. They also worked to keep me on my toes, and I was watchful for not only surprise snowballs and snide remarks aimed at me, but also elusive smiles and uncontained laughter while hiking or canoeing in the rain. The students were

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## GLOSSARY

AOP	Alternative Outdoor Program (a pseudonym) – an alternative high school program in a large urban setting in Western Canada that is grounded in outdoor and experiential understandings and practices
NHS	North High School (a pseudonym) – a large urban high school serving a diverse student population, whose campus AOP portable buildings are located upon
BOD	The Board of Directors for the fundraising and governance arm of AOP; used synonymously with the AOP Foundation, as these were one and the same entity
LSB	The Local School Board (a pseudonym) that administrates/manages all schools in the catchment area where AOP is located
SLC	School Leaving Certificate – a certificate granted by the BC Ministry of Education to a student who has not accumulated enough credits to receive a Dogwood Diploma after five years enrolled in high school
DW	Dogwood Diploma – a certificate conferred by the BC Ministry of Education to a student who has accumulated at least 80 required course credits prior to completing 5 years of high school before the student turns 20 years of age
BC	The province of British Columbia, Canada
ADHD	Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder
CLD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse – a description of ‘at-risk’ or ‘marginalized’ youth used by Heydon and Iannacci (2008), potentially less problematic than re-inscribing risk discourse terminology
MOE	British Columbia Ministry of Education
LD	Learning Disabled/Disability

# **CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION**

## **PERSONAL JOURNEY TO A DISSERTATION**

### **Original Visions**

At the start of my PhD, my original vision for my doctoral research was to explore the possibilities of experiential education programs, populated by youth ‘at-risk,’ that operate on a model of prevention as opposed to one of intervention. My Masters thesis had focused on the physical act of backpacking in a wilderness therapy (WT) program, and for that work I was curious to know how the adolescents had understood the embodied movement of backpacking itself and instructors who were immersed together in a wilderness setting. As I studied the literature and current practices and trends in the WT field, I realized that here was a treatment almost exclusively serving the children of parents or guardians who could afford it. The fees required from the families of those attending were and are significant, to the tune of \$15,000 to \$30,000+ US, covering an all-expenses 6 to 8 week stay. Although scholarships and interest-free loans were and are available for qualifying participants, and although some health insurance policies cover some costs of treatment, most parents/guardians paid out-of-pocket to cover the fees of having their children ‘rehabilitated.’ This troubled me because these usually white, middle class young people were in wilderness therapy, while I imagined that other less affluent or socially- or racially-privileged young people went into a juvenile detention centre, dropped out of school, were

successful in their suicide attempt, ran (and potentially stayed) away from home, or continued to experience any number of other negative life events. Some of the youth I met during my Masters research were able to avoid time in a juvenile detention facility by having a lawyer argue that the wilderness program would better serve the youth and society. Judges, who in some locales are required to consider the financial costs of detention, appeared to agree; a juvenile justice detention sentence is uniformly more expensive than attending a WT program. However, only those families affluent enough to intervene with a program like these had the chance to avoid both possible dangerous activities by and incarceration of their children. It appeared to me that many youth from poor or marginalized families simply did not have access.

After my Masters research ended, I became increasingly critical of the over-arching framework of WT. Here was an extreme, expensive, and sometimes initially traumatic process of intervention for youth who were facing challenges. I learned in the course of the research that many parents lied to their children about where they were going, often justifying the trip by saying it was a visit to a relative, or a family holiday. A few parents of youth I worked with hired private companies to abduct their own children from their beds at night in order to have them transported to the wilderness therapy program. Clearly, many young people were, and are, in serious need of a response to particular behaviours, and most WT clients appear to benefit from their time in the program (Caulkins, White & Russell, 2006; Russell, 2003). However, I could not help but wonder whether there was a more preventative model of therapy that used wilderness immersion

and/or experiential education activities to help young people who were facing difficulty at school and/or at home. My thinking at this point was still focused on the individual child, and on therapy, and so my questions remained on prevention and behaviour: What methods exist to assist youth in making choices for themselves prior to starting up harmful behaviour? What are alternatives to expensive WT that can support youth who might be engaging in dangerous activities? I also wondered what was available for those whose parents lacked the financial resources to pay for 'treatment.' What other options were available, and what other ways were people addressing the needs of marginalized youth who were disengaging from school and/or from healthy ways of living? It was during this time that education as a field of study appealed to me, and I was curious to do research into what public schools themselves were doing to support the kinds of youth who usually came to WT. Certainly there were resources in the society that tried to assist these young people, and I wanted to know what they were and how they worked. Eventually I applied to PhD programs in education, was accepted to SFU, and started classes in the fall of 2004.

### **AOP Research**

After completing the four required doctoral seminars at SFU and passing my comprehensive examinations, I found myself simultaneously looking for a thesis project and volunteering with a public alternative program catering to 'at-risk' labelled youth. The Alternative Outdoor Program (AOP, a pseudonym), located on the campus of a public secondary school called North High School (NHS, a pseudonym) in an urban area in British Columbia (BC), operates on



many of the elements I was looking for in terms of my research interests at the time. The staff cultivate long-term commitments to the 'at-risk' labelled youth in their program through a variety of processes: academics are conducted via an individually-adapted and integrated high school curriculum, experiential education is a core value and practice, individual and group therapy is conducted in-house on an on-going basis, and students are expected to complete weekly community service. I proceeded to volunteer frequently with AOP on their weekly outdoor trips over the course of several years, and also spent time in and around the classrooms working with students and staff. After a few months volunteering I was approached by AOP's fund-raising and governance arm, the AOP Foundation/Board of directors (BOD) to see if I was interested in doing a research project for them. The BOD, responsible for oversight of AOP operations, foundation finances/budget, fundraising initiatives, and community and media relations, invited me to conduct a program evaluation of AOP. They were hoping to learn the strengths and weaknesses of the program they oversaw, ideally uncovering what was happening to their students after leaving the school. The BOD was interested in four areas: What were former students doing with their lives in terms of employment, academics, substance use/health, and criminal activity? Was the program a factor in changing former students' lives, and if so, what processes were most helpful to that end?

Excited to have such a project literally fall in my lap, I drafted a two-phase research proposal that would be acceptable for both the BOD and my own doctoral research agenda: The first phase would address the BOD's interests,

and the second would address my own interests. As I created the proposal for the BOD concerning how the research would be done, I was somewhat dazzled by the actuality of being able to do research on a program in the field that I was interested in. Upon reviewing my original proposal and budget estimates, the BOD explained that the balance of their research budget would fund the first half of the research, but not the second. I had wanted to collect data on the program according to the BOD's interests in the first phase, and then do participatory action research (PAR) with the staff and administrators at the school for the second phase, based on information gleaned from the first phase (for more information on PAR, see Whyte, 1991). In other words, I would first learn about and share the strengths and weaknesses of the program with the BOD and staff, and then work directly with staff and school administration to provide energy, resources and direction for staff-made improvements to the conceptual and practical processes in place at the program. As noted above, however, I would only be funded to complete the first half of the research.

I agreed to the paid research contract with the BOD because I was so close with the staff at AOP, felt loyalty to the program, and I also needed to put food on the table for my partner, new baby, and myself. I planned to fulfil my obligations to the BOD by pursuing their interests, and assumed that this project, although not quite what I had originally hoped for, would be meaningful and large enough to craft a solid dissertation from. Along this line of reasoning, and feeling the need to expand on what the BOD was doing to at least include the spirit of what I had previously wanted to do, I worked to include some of interests and

questions of the staff into the project. I felt it was imperative that I garner questions for the interviews, which I believed would generate the strongest data set for the project, from not only the BOD, but also from the staff who worked with the students in a day to day capacity. I decided to interview as many *former* students of the program as possible, and find out how their lives had changed from before, to during, to after their contact with the program. I engaged in the project holding the belief that I was moving to help improve the BOD's and the staff's work by providing some awareness of what was currently going on in the lives of their former students; I assumed this work at AOP would become my dissertation.

Being relatively new to alternative education and wanting to remain adaptable in the face of a new field of study and practice, I searched for a research design that would allow for flexibility and breadth in data collection. I was not entirely sure if I would have the space or time to collect data on the areas of the program I was interested in, and so flexibility, breadth, and the capacity to do ongoing iterations of data collection seemed to be the best option. Knowing how involved PAR was to conduct, and how I would not be funded to do it, I was also unclear of exactly what my role in the research would be. At that point, I decided to use a case study design for the program evaluation, and sought data through interviews, program observation, document collection, focus groups and indirect conversations with staff. For details of design selection, data collection and analysis, please see Chapter 3.

During the AOP research I sent updates of my progress and working drafts of the report as they became available to my contact on the BOD, and that person and I worked through a number of issues in order to clarify and structure the work in a way that would be most helpful to the BOD. Ultimately, I presented all of the results in the form of an oral presentation and a written report, hoping it would provide some insight for the BOD and the staff into the lives of the former students of AOP. My plan was to take the final report and flesh it out to meet the mandates of SFU, my committee, and the field.

Summarizing the main results from this part of the research, results were split into two areas: 1) findings for the BOD reporting on academics, employment, substance use/health and criminality status of former AOP students, and 2) findings for the staff reporting on staff involvement, counselling, outdoor activities, and familial aspects of AOP. In terms of BOD interests, generally former students were seen to be gainfully employed in full-time jobs and no longer participating in criminal activity, but they did not appear to be continuing their education (although many were aspiring to do so) and they did report continuing use and abuse of substances. Although 75% felt they had been academically successful at AOP, only 25% had graduated with a dogwood diploma and 40% felt the scholastics at AOP needed major improvement. I should note here that a 'dogwood' is the high school diploma granted to students in British Columbia who complete all of their required credits (either regular or adapted curriculum) before they turn 20 years of age (BC Ministry of Education, 2009). In relation to the staff interests, the depth of staff involvement in students'

lives, the ongoing and everyday access to counselling at AOP, the way AOP staff helped the program participants feel like they were in a 'family,' and the outdoor activities, were seen as being the most important aspects of the alternative program by former students. In the final report I also provided a series of suggestions and potential improvements based on my findings.

The final report and presentation were received with little celebration and mostly misgivings from the BOD. At the time of the presentation, findings were not cross-referenced with recent data from other studies of similar populations, and the BOD found the report to be somewhat incomplete in this regard. This issue was indeed well founded, and would need to be addressed to fulfil my obligations to the BOD. Compounding this problem was the fact that the BOD took serious issue with one of my findings and associated suggestion, namely, that there existed miscommunications between the BOD and the staff, and that the BOD should work towards improving communications and consensus around roles and responsibilities with staff. In response to this finding, at the end of the question and answer period, it was the general consensus from the BOD that the report should *not* be shared with the staff at the program. Regardless of the fact that I had been telling staff that the report was nearly completed and I would be sharing it with them soon, the BOD felt that the report could cause damage to the relationship between the BOD and the staff at AOP. The BOD's decision not to share the report with staff generated tension and created distance between the BOD and myself, and I felt myself moving away from the staff and the project in general shortly thereafter. At this stage, I began a process of re-evaluation to

better understand what had happened and how I should move forward with the data I had collected and the project.

With a little distance from these events, I came to see that my direct work with AOP was instrumental in bringing me close to a form of education I was fascinated by, providing intimate understanding and insight into the workings of one alternative education program in BC. Perhaps more importantly, I also realized the questions guiding my data collection up until this point were not entirely my own. I came to see that the questions provided by the BOD were potentially a part of the problem that I was starting to uncover, and it became clear that all of my direct work with AOP, although voluminous, would not fulfil my aspirations for the dissertation.

### **Critical Re-reflections on Alternative Education**

After these events and with more time spent regrouping my thoughts, I began to read literature that deeply questioned the aims and practices of both alternative and mainstream education. From this reading I learned to ask: What kinds of beliefs and assumptions went into the creation of the idea of 'troubled' or 'at-risk' youth? What individuals or entities were being served by having 10 or 20 percent of the school-age population labelled in these ways? Ivan Illich (1977) opened my eyes to the fact that justice officers/officials, health care workers, youth advocates, special education teachers, social workers, alternative education specialists, therapists, and other youth management professionals had a monopoly over the 'treatments,' 'interventions,' and 'rehabilitation' of young people in BC. Indeed, in one sense, the jobs and institutions of these

professionals were at stake; if there were no more youth crime, leading to adult crime, or no more 'at-risk,' 'troubled' or marginalized youth in need of services, there would be no demand for a large set of professional groups and their associated social institutions (i.e., education, juvenile justice, medicine, psychology). This is not to say that people in these fields want to see a maintained or increasing number of young people with serious problems, but rather that our institutionalized systems of education, health care and justice not only expect but depend on new populations of 'clients' each year (Illich, 1970, 1977).

Reading and grappling with Paulo Freire's ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2003), I began to think about who the oppressors in our society might be that benefit from the creation and re-creation of an oppressed class or 'underclass' (Reed, 1992) of individuals less likely to be academically successful and therefore less likely to successful outside of school. In this sense, as I re-considered the direction of my doctoral research, I wondered what else I could do to increase the scope and criticality of the work. Beth Blue Swadener's (1995) book on the risk discourse helped me realize that the entire notion of 'risk' was a construct wielded by social institutions and individuals working in media, academe/education, politics/political parties, and the legal/justice system. The risk construct maintains a specific perspective on young people and families that ultimately 'blames the victim' and harms specific students in a way that are difficult to recover from (Swadener, 1995; Valencia, 1997). I started to consider the ways that my inquiry could expand, investigating the ways that educational

professionals and their institutions shape and are shaped by ideology and discourse (Illich, 1970, 1977; McDermott, 1996; McGinnis, 2009).

Again turning to Ivan Illich (1970, 1977), it appeared to me that large-scale education, political and economic institutions were the ones setting the agenda and maintaining particular negative perspectives of 'at-risk' labelled youth. Reading Illich helped me realize the need to alter the scope of my work within alternative education in order to generate greater meaning and value for both myself and a larger audience. The program evaluation of AOP provided a partial vision of how alternative education is done in BC, and stepping beyond that aspect of the work to continue with what I felt I was being called to do felt necessary.

Following the suggestion of one of the instructors at AOP, I decided to interview administrative and policy-level employees at NHS, at the local school board (LSB) that provides teachers and other educational resources to AOP and NHS, and at the British Columbia Ministry of Education (MOE) which provides funding, curriculum and policy for the province. The participants I contacted and interviewed provided insight into the ways that students are labelled, funded, and supported within alternative programs in the province, and I paid particularly close attention to the language being used by these participants in their interviews. I felt the words describing alternative students would help me see the ways that these youth are defined and framed for use by professionals, institutions and society. Merging both the earlier data from AOP and the more



recent data from NHS, the LSB and the MOE helped me see the paradoxes inherent to these systems.

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM, PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

### **Problem**

Since first being coined in *A Nation at Risk* (US Department of Education, 1983), the term 'at-risk,' and the subsequent focus on the concepts of risk and risk behaviours in school-aged individuals have proliferated widely in professional, academic and colloquial usage. Although waning in its power as a scientific construct, it is still used by researchers and practitioners across many fields, including medicine, psychology, education, social work, recreation and leisure studies, nursing, and criminology. Many of these fields and the professionals working within them, however, are not critical of their usage of the construct, and the term 'at-risk youth' therefore becomes code for a particular paradigm of thought. To quote Swadener (1995): "...there is an emerging ideology of risk, which has embedded in it interpretations of children's deficiencies or likelihood of failure due to environmental, as well as individual, variables. The problem of locating pathology in the victim is the most objectionable tenet of much of the dominant rhetoric of risk" (p. 4). This idea of pathologizing students in the process of education, locating a 'risk of failure' within young victims of poverty, racism, and classism, is a relevant topic for educators to be discussing today. Risk as a discourse, including the deployment of associated negative labels onto youth (e.g., ADHD, Learning Disabled or LD,

‘at-risk,’ problem behaviour, complex needs), can paint a particularly damaging picture of individuals and families, at least when wielded by those in power; researchers and practitioners need to do a better job of investigating underlying deficit models that propagate risk and labelling ideology, determining the groups that are benefited and harmed from the pathologization of young people and their families (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008; Swadener, 1995).

### ***Meritocracy, Poverty, and the Production of an Underclass***

Meritocracy is a system of conferring rewards, power and/or leadership upon those who are deemed to be most able. In modern education systems, meritocracy is expressed as a competitive norm, where rewards (i.e., higher marks, access to higher and/or more prestigious learning institutions) are most often distributed to those who out-perform their peers (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Rodriguez (1998) questions several practices of academic meritocracy, one of which is the placing of particular students into particular tracks or streams of education, such as ‘slow’ and ‘fast’ learner groups, classrooms or programs. This practice, after evaluating and identifying particular cadres of students, supposedly allows different groups of learners to continue their education at a pace most appropriate to their abilities and needs. Rodriguez states that operating a meritocracy in this way effectively segregates learners in schools, because the distribution of language and other ‘academic’ skills can vary dramatically between economic, racial and cultural groups when held up to the measuring stick of the middle class values enacted in schools. Similarly, sociologists researching socio-economic stratification in and out of schools

suggest that education as a social system maintains and supports the propagation of middle class values in North America (McNamee & Miller, 2004). In other words, schools, operating as a meritocracy, simultaneously expect and reproduce middle class values; students who exhibit/practice/perform these values in school will tend to do better than their peers.

Research from the United States shows how students of Aboriginal, Hispanic, and African descent, each one considered a marginalized group who has been historically oppressed in North American culture, are significantly more likely to drop out of school than their counterparts of European descent (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). Those students who are able to demonstrate average or above-average performance on evaluations of knowledge exemplify success in school. An academic meritocracy that sees itself as fair assumes that all individuals working within the system have equal access to the tools/concepts/items that will be evaluated to determine who is most 'able.' If a student fails to reach a particular score on a particular test, academic ability is likely called into question by all involved (e.g., student, teacher, administrator), potentially undermining engagement, interest, self-concept, and motivation, and therefore possibilities for academic, and later employment, success in the student. Ivan Illich (1970) would remind us here that the economics of the modern state requires failure in the sorting machine that is compulsory education: an underclass of people are needed to compete for the low-level work in the service industries that maintain the consumer-based fabric of our society.

This is the hidden purpose of institutionalized education in North America (Illich, 1970).

This dissertation attempts to explore the ways that young people located in alternative programs in British Columbia have been marginalized in some way through the institution of education. North American society is stratified along racial, economic and cultural boundaries, and youth who are a part of marginalized groups (i.e., poor, racial/cultural minority, immigrant) are disproportionately placed in the alternative education system (Munoz, 2005; Smith, Peled, Albert, MacKay, Stewart & Saewyc, 2007), a large portion of whom are unlikely to graduate compared to their mainstream peers (Smith et al., 2007).

Sociologically speaking, children from a family with low socio-economic status (SES) come to school equipped with fewer tools for academic advancement than their middle or upper SES counterparts (Newman, 1996). Affluent youth generally have greater access to books, tutors/helping parents, leisure time, nourishing food, comfortable clothing and lodging, and their family life may be less disjointed or stressful than youth who have fewer resources available to them. Youth who come from home situations dealing with poverty, homelessness, substance abuse or addiction, incarceration, hunger, unstable living conditions, foster care, and/or frequent moves are going to be less able to focus on academics in school as youth whose families do not have these kinds of issues (Tom Carrick, personal communication, 2010; McNamee & Miller, 2004). In a competitive academic meritocracy, this means the 'less academically able' students will have less success in school. A young person who is otherwise

intelligent and capable of doing average or excellent academic work in school might not have the focus, motivation and determination in the face of hunger, addiction, shoddy clothing, crime or abuse. On the other hand, a wealthy family might be able to afford to pay for a tutor, special resources or other interventions that could assist a child who lacks the intelligence or motivation in being successful academically, even if the family has issues of substance abuse/addiction, incarceration, or frequent moving. Furthermore, a student whose family *is* middle class and casually practices/embodies these values in their everyday language, manner and attitudes will carry this 'cultural capital' with them into school, and will reap greater rewards because of it. In this sense, it is important to see individual performance as impacted by unequal distribution of academic tools (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Illich (1970) similarly describes this process:

It should be obvious that even with schools of equal quality a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one. Even if they attend equal schools and begin at the same age, poor children lack most of the educational opportunities which are casually available to the middle-class child. (p. 6)

This body of inquiry shows the relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance. Children from poor families are likely to do poorly (no pun intended) in school because of the ways that education has been designed in North America. Reading and writing skills will be better for those youth who have been exposed to a lot of written material, and have the free time to engage in and absorb those activities and behaviours that are associated with academic success. Further, youth who have significant adults in their lives who

model the importance of literacy (and numeracy) will see those skills as important, as opposed to youth who do not have that sort of modelling at home. For example, affluent families may have more time to read with their children, while families with less means, whose parents may be working multiple jobs for little pay, may have less or no time to devote to reading for themselves or with their children. This is just one example.

### ***Pathologization, Deficit Model Thinking, and Negative School Labels***

Some researchers suggest that educational professionals unconsciously, and systemically, pathologize students in schools through ingrained deficit model thinking (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005). Labelled students, after not just hearing it, but being treated like a 'needy' child, a youth 'at-risk,' or 'learning disabled' over their time in school, tend to adopt that identity, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies of failure (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Prosser, 2006). Negative labels of disability, behavioural problems or emotional or mental deficiencies adhere themselves to individuals and usually are difficult to remove, both institutionally (McDermott, 1996) and personally (Dallos, Neale, & Strouthos, 1997). In terms of race, research has shown that minority students across North America are suspended from school more often than white students (Brooks, Schialdi & Ziedenberg, 2000; Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2008). The labelling action of the school system and the deficit model thinking of teachers and administrators means youth who do not fit the middle class values are more likely to be disciplined, do poorly in school, be shunted into alternative programs, and drop out.

Youth given negative labels may lose their sense of academic responsibility, so even if they could help themselves, they do not. Self-fulfilling prophecies of failure often occur in this population, where a negative school label or learning disability (LD) diagnosis can end up becoming a major aspect of the student's identity (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). In this way, youth carrying negative labels may lose the will to take responsibility for themselves and their behaviour, as it may be easier to adopt the label the education system is working to place over them than to resist it. Indeed, it makes sense that in some ways students adopt a posture of submission, accepting the label in order to receive the extra 'support' that comes with the moniker. For example, a student might unconsciously be living out the thought: "If I'm stupid, then I guess I belong in an alternate school. If I'm in an alternate school with watered down lessons and academics, why should I care or try?"

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation was originally going to be an investigation into conceptions of risk and negative labels commonly associated with alternative students (i.e., at-risk, troubled, learning disabled, problem behaviour, behaviourally challenged, risk-factors), including an analysis of the impacts those labels have on the population of students inhabiting alternative education contexts. As this project moved forward, however, the purpose evolved, as I came to realize that the labels, although problematic, served as symptoms of a larger problem, namely the pathologization of youth through deficit-model thinking within the institution of education. Using a case study approach, the

concepts of pathologization, deficit-model thinking, and negative school labels were analyzed, observing the way these ideas and practices arise in empirical data collected from former alternative students and alternative education professionals working as teachers, administrators, staff and policy makers within the educational hierarchy of BC. Understanding the ways that the three processes outlined above are played out among the individuals, the program(s), and the institution is the goal.

### **Question**

These questions revolving around alternative education, labelling and framing of youth, and the professional and institutional use of risk and other pathologizing discourses were ones that fed my interest in the work.

From the beginning there were a number of questions pulling at me, including questions pertaining to socio-cultural and economic stratification, the creation of 'at-risk' youth in society and education, negative school labels, the pathologization of youth through deficit model thinking, and the reactions and responsibilities of educational professionals to youth in alternative settings. The work of Swadener, Illich, and other critical theorists (Fine, 1988; Heydon & Iannacci, 2008; McDermott, 1996; McGinnis, 2009; Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005) led me to ponder this range of questions, such as: What educational processes are in place that help to create an 'underclass' of young people in North American society? How do educational professionals working at different levels of the provincial education system explain how more than 20% of all students who entered Grade 7 in 2004 did not graduate in 2010 (BC Ministry of



Education, 2010a)? How does alternative education fit within these issues of risk discourse, labelling, and pathologization, especially when most alternative students face these issues? Knowing there are a higher number of marginalized and street-involved youth attending alternative programs (Smith et al., 2007), how do alternative practitioners approach students?

The language and labelling issues that I observed within AOP appeared to be a symptom of the larger, more entrenched problems of deficit model thinking and pathologization occurring in the institutional form of education operating in BC, and across North America, really. In order to focus the research as the project progressed, however, I reduced the myriad possibilities down to just one question and a twp-part follow-up:

How do the language and practices used by alternative education professionals and students within alternative programs, school boards, and the provincial ministry of education label and frame youth? In what ways does this language and these practices re-create a youth underclass, and what might be done to address underlying or entrenched attitudes and assumptions that propagate these problems?

## **MY OWN LANGUAGE USE**

I have struggled with how to best address the young people I am dealing with here in my dissertation. In my Masters thesis I used the term 'troubled' youth because it sidestepped the term 'at-risk,' a term I found inherently problematic. After I started the work with AOP, I thought that if I just wrote about alternative students as being 'labelled,' whether it was 'at-risk' or 'problem-behaviour' or 'learning disabled' or 'complex needs,' then it would at least bring to the forefront the issue of labels and labelling. It would be seen as something that happened *to*

a young person, and not something that they necessarily did to themselves through their own actions. Although these young people obviously have choices over how to act in the world around them, these decisions are constrained in particular ways by their lived realities. Swadener (1995) coined the term “youth and families at-promise” in a move that shifts the emphasis from deficits and weaknesses to assets and possibilities. I appreciate Swadener’s reversal from a deficit focus to a strengths- or asset-oriented focus. Another term, from a book about de-pathologizing childhood in educational settings by Heydon and Iannacci (2008), is ‘culturally and linguistically diverse’ (CLD), describing students who otherwise might be labelled and pathologized with terms such as ‘at-risk,’ ‘learning disabled,’ ‘behaviour problem,’ or ‘complex needs.’ The term CLD, like ‘youth at promise,’ is similarly less problematic than ‘at-risk,’ ‘troubled,’ or even ‘labelled’ because it focuses on the diversity of backgrounds many young people come from, as well as the diversity of strengths, knowledges, needs, resources and behaviours that educational professionals can and should expect from students in a modern, pluralistic society. So using CLD as a descriptor helps to re-locate the focus from the individual and the pathologies and deficits projected onto that individual, and towards the kinds of teachers, administrators and schools that will best be able to provide worthwhile education to an increasingly diverse student body (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008). Other studies in the field, including Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005), use the term ‘marginalized’ youth, to show how, for a variety of reasons, students may find themselves on the margins of society and/or of their school. This term places the responsibility for

the marginal status on some force or entity outside of the student, suggesting that the students themselves may not be to blame for their position within the power structures of school and society.

In the discussions of youth in alternative education in this dissertation, I strive to be self-reflexive in an attempt to reduce harm that might be done to those I am supposedly trying to serve. In this process of writing about a population of people that I am not a part of, I suspect I may be doing harm in ways that I am not aware of, but perhaps this is one of the risks of attempting to do critical social science research. I suspect in many points in this dissertation I am inculcated in the very thing I am trying to avoid, namely continuing the practice of negative labelling of youth. I am not consistent in my use of language, although I tend to use CLD, marginalized, pathologized, or 'at-risk' labelled youth to describe this population.

## **ORDER OF CHAPTERS – AN OVERVIEW**

Chapter 2 describes the theoretical foundations for the piece, exploring the concepts of pathologization, deficit model thinking, and school labels.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of methods, including research design, participants, data sources, analysis, and some work on limitations of and biases in the research.

Chapter 4 contains the results of the research, presenting multiple sets of paradoxical relationships in alternative education.

Chapter 5 reflects on the implications of the results, outlining impacts of the study on current practice as well as suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2 – THEORETICAL TERRAIN: PATHOLOGIZATION, DEFICIT MODEL THINKING AND SCHOOL LABELS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

To prepare the groundwork for the presentation of paradoxes in alternative education that I discuss in Chapter 4, theories of education that help to frame and explain processes of marginalization that many students face must be discussed. Pathologization, deficit model thinking, and the negative labelling of youth in schools are explored here.

### **PATHOLOGIZATION**

In their book, *Pathologizing Practices*, Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) explain the process through which pathologizing the lived experience of students in schools becomes commonplace, revealing how it occurs, develops and impacts different groups of young people. Shields et al. (2005) define pathologization in terms of power:

Pathologizing is a process where perceived structural-functional, cultural, or epistemological deviation from an assumed normal state is ascribed to another group as a product of power relationships, whereby the less powerful group is deemed to be abnormal in some way. Pathologizing is a mode of colonization used to govern, regulate, manage, marginalize, or minoritize, primarily through hegemonic discourses (p. x).

The abnormality ascribed to the person/group is then seen to be in need of correction through some form of intervention. Heydon and Iannacci (2008)

suggest that in schools this intervention is most often of a medical-scientific nature, and is usually applied to young people who are CLD. A brief review of the historical contexts within which the practice of pathologization evolved, explored below, helps set the stage for a deeper understanding of how pathologization plays out in schools.

The conception and practice of pathologization is not new, and it has roots in colonialism and modern medicine (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005). During colonization, where colonized populations have traditionally been seen as deficient compared to colonizers, actions towards making the native inhabitants more 'civilized' were generally seen as desirable, and even unavoidable (Shields et al.). Pathology, meaning a physical, emotional and/or mental disease or abnormality, at least in comparison to the colonials, was located in the natives' bodies, minds and souls, with native people often described as lazy, slow-witted and incompetent (McNair & Rumley, 1981). In the case of medicine, the term pathology has common usage, describing the science or study of the origin, nature, and course of diseases (Costello, 1992). In terms of the overlap between medicine and colonialism, one critical scholar in Australia cites the medical literature in their arguments concerning ongoing racism in that country (Bashford, 2000). Bashford discusses examples of European physicians doing research on colonized populations, revealing how native people were ascribed socio-medical positions outside of the 'normal' range set by the colonizers. Indeed, one of the definitions of pathology is "...any deviation from a healthy, normal, or efficient condition," (Costello, 1992, p.990) which suggests there is a norm that one is

deviating from. Bashford also notes that European physicians doing research on hygiene in colonized populations found indigenous people to be 'pure' or 'uncontaminated' prior to colonization, but with very low immunity. Therefore the natives were seen as unable to resist or cope with civilization and therefore could justifiably be contained spatially on reservations or other similar places 'for their own good.' In this light, colonial medicine and the inherent deficits seen in the natives were less of an environmental or scientific study and more about medical governance of colonized peoples. Considering the current practice of alternative education, obviously marginal containment spaces (i.e., reserves, reservations, 'Indian Schools') for undesirables can be seen as reminiscent of the portable buildings (portables) so often holding alternative education students. In a more general sense, the containment of the vast majority of youth in North America within the confines of some kind of school building, campus and discipline structure suggests an even wider system of regulation over potentially 'risky' youths.

Another link between pathology in a medical sense, and pathologization in a political colonizing sense, is noted by Shields et al. (2005), who, citing Valencia (1997), reveal the ongoing sequence of "description-explanation-prediction-prescription" that occurs in schools (Valencia, 1997, p. 7). Shields et al. go on to cite Skrla and Scheurich (2001) who extrapolate on how this idea is deployed in educational settings:

In other words, first educators *describe* deficits, deficiencies, limitations, and shortcomings in children of colour and children from low-income homes; next educators *explain* those deficits by locating them in such factors as limited intelligence or dysfunctional

families, then educators *predict* the perpetuation and accumulation of the deficits; and finally educators *prescribe* educational interventions designed to remediate the deficits (p. 236). (emphasis is mine)

Here we begin to see the connections between deficit model thinking, which are explained in the next section, and pathologization.

The ‘cure’ of these ‘deficits’ invariably includes modification of the individual victim, often without prescriptions for modifications to the systems within which these deficits arise (Valencia, 2010). Dallos, Neale and Strouthos (1997), citing Foucault, suggest that:

...people are ‘conscripted’ into pathological identities and...that this was a feature of the dominant Western scientific and medical discourse. This invariably involves the use (and abuse) of power to impose such meanings on people, and in turn to apply sanctions, such as exclusion or even enforced treatments (p. 371).

Swadener (1995) describes this process as epidemiological in nature, turning a medical process that seeks to diagnosis and eradicate a disease to one that seeks to diagnosis and eradicate school failure. Swadener goes on to explain how these practices most often locate the potential for school failure within students of racial, cultural, and linguistic minorities, as well as students of low socio-economic status. These are also the same students seen to be most in need of early intervention in Heydon and Iannacci’s (2008) work, who, we will remember from Chapter 1, use the term CLD to showcase diversity rather than deficit in their discussions of marginalized students. These “pathologizing practices” (Shields et al.) are not by mistake, in that the actions of the school are the result of an institution that systematically privileges the ‘normative’ positions



of white upper-class society (McGinnis, 2009; McNamee & Miller, 2004) by conferring rewards on those who carry the mark of the upper classes in their attitudes and behaviours and penalties for those who do not carry such a mark.

Educational professionals in schools, as we shall see in Chapter 4, believe that they are doing their best to work for the good of alternate students. These professionals, like the education institution itself, strive for and often do help those seen to be 'in need,' but the structures and professionals working from within the education system merely reify the values, relationships, processes, and power differentials that maintain the unjust social and economic hierarchies of the society. The point here is that pathologization in schools generates negative impacts for generations of students by maintaining a perspective of deficiency, and pathologization practice uses a problematic notion of the norm, which makes for an unequal educational playing field. In other words, those in powerful positions/classes will tend to stay in those positions/classes through the normalization of upper class values in schools.

Recent research in education describes some of the ways that race and economic status are played out in schools, and can be seen to be a part of the pathologization of particular groups of students. For example, research shows that CLD students and students from low SES backgrounds receive disciplinary action in school more often and more severely than is proportional to their population (Civil Rights Project, 2000; Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba, 2000). Other research shows that students from racial or cultural minority groups, as well as students from low SES families, continue to graduate in substantially lower

numbers and do worse academically than students who are Caucasian or are from higher SES backgrounds (Brownell et al., 2004; Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). To bring this home to British Columbia, 50.4% of First Nations students who entered grade 7 in 2004 graduated with their dogwood diploma 6 years later, as compared to the 79.7% average 6-year provincial graduation rate (BC Ministry of Education, 2010a). Using the pathologization concept as lens, it is possible to view these kinds of educational disparities as a product of the education system itself, and not as inherent problems within particular groups of individuals. Knowing that the literature and statistics on CLD and low SES youth in BC and other North American school settings gives us a sense that pathologization may be operating, it is important to further understand the underlying models and assumptions that support pathologization processes.

## **DEFICIT MODEL THINKING**

The concept of deficit model thinking has recently been described as shifting the blame for particular problems from structural defects in a given system to the cognitive, emotional, genetic, or behavioural defects within an individual victim of that system (Valencia, 2010). The entire paradigm of deficit thought assumes that individuals or groups have some inherent flaw (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and/or motivational problems) that makes it more likely that they will fail to be successful in school, employment, and/or in other important aspects of life (Valencia, 1997). Valencia (2010) describes deficit thought this way: “Deficit thinking is tantamount to the process of ‘blaming the victim.’ It is a model founded on imputation, not documentation” (p. xiv). This means deficit

model thinking is an attitude, position, perspective or disposition one carries, and it can have real impacts on students' lives. For example, McKown and Weinstein (2008), in a study examining the impact of teacher expectations on the academic success of ethnic minorities (specifically students of African and Hispanic heritage), showed that teachers' expectations of ethnic minorities negatively impacted academic performance. In other words, when teachers have low expectations for the academic performance of CLD students, which is a form of deficit model thinking, it can have direct, and negative, academic implications.

One perspective of deficit model thinking in education implies that youth who exhibit signs of academic weakness, lapses in motivation or engagement, and/or extreme behaviour, in comparison to a specific norm, are seen as potential failures. Unfortunately, as the system of education currently operates in North America, these predictions are often all too realistic. These are the 'at-risk youth' or 'youth with complex needs' that media, academics, and educational professionals will often speak of without any attention to the impacts this kind of language and perspective has. In holding a deficit perspective, that specific youth are 'potential failures' as opposed to 'youth at promise' or 'potential successes,' the school and the society jointly create the environment in which failure is both expected and actually occurs. In providing interventions for 'potential failures,' such as various alternate programs, the school is seen to be preventing these youth from becoming future welfare participants or criminals; directing money and support to 'youth at-risk' is commonly seen to be a good thing.

The concept of 'risk factors,' and indeed the entire discourse of 'at-risk' youth "...have gained widespread currency in the educational lexicon" (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 321), and can be seen as a pathologizing practice where educational professionals look for deficits potentially leading to failure just as a medical practitioner might look for symptoms or precursors potentially leading to a disease. Supposedly used to determine the level of risk that an individual child is exposed to, the theory is that the more risk factors a young person possesses (i.e., low SES, single parent household, low marks, absenteeism, substance abuse, parental incarceration), the greater their risk of school and/or life failure (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Baldwin, 2000; Wells, 1990). The problem with the idea of 'risk factors' is that a child is seen to embody their socio-economic status, their parents' immigration status, the location of their home, or the number of parents they have living at home with them, few if any of which the child has any control over. The idea of risk, at least as it is portrayed in the literature, suggests the use of actuarial models that attempt to balance risk factors and protective factors, or certain aspects of a child's life, will either help or hinder their capacity to do well in school (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Swadener (1995) suggests that by laying actuarial models of risk (i.e., cost/benefit analysis) over young people in schools, we can do significant harm to the child, to the parents, and to their community. Barron and Lacombe (2005), citing Lupton (1999), reiterate how actuarial models, as technical and scientific solutions, ignore the socio-cultural creation of risk. If schools claim to be egalitarian, then seeing the possibility within students is what

is needed, not pushing them through an equation to determine expectations and appropriate responses.

Unfortunately, 'at-risk' labels, 'risk factors' and educational funding categories from the MOE perpetuate the deficit model in the minds of educational professionals, and appear to be the standard in terms of how pathologized youth are classified in schools. This model locates 'risk factors,' such as attention 'disorders' or linguistic differences, within the individual student and/or their family, whereas if the focus was reversed and the 'risk factors' were located within the institution of educational, very different 'interventions' might be prescribed (Swadener, 1995). For example, if the structural designs and procedures of schools and education systems were seen to contain 'risk factors,' interventions might include professional development for teachers and administrators to be more flexible in the face of diversity, more funding for flexible or alternative curriculum, modifications to assessment and evaluation, and changes in the reward systems for secondary and post-secondary institutions to be more inclusive of cultural differences in terms of knowledge acquisition and demonstration. By reversing the critical eye and examining the ways the educational institution itself is to blame for student failure, it opens the possibility to consider what else might be possible in terms of how people can and should learn. This idea is picked up in Chapter 5, with some discussion of Ivan Illich (1970, 1977) and the ways an institutional critique can provide avenues of resistance to deficit model thinking.

From a Freirian (2003) perspective, it is possible to consider the entire North American education system as built upon deficiency in that students generally are understood as lacking experience and knowledge: all students in schools are assumed to not know things, or to hold little or limited valid knowledge, and thus are in need of the services that mainstream schools and teachers have to offer. In Freire's theory of banking education, teachers embody authoritative status quo knowledge, and are charged with filling students, who are reduced to knowledge receptacles, with these accepted forms of knowledge. This system excludes diverse cultural and linguistic realities and the associated forms of knowledge that may be available to students outside of the upper and middle classes. This is a cyclical process, as the generally white, middle class teachers themselves have been filled with and taught to assume the mainstream forms of knowledge are 'good' and 'normal.' Attitudes, behaviours, postures, and performances of knowledge that are divergent to the mainstream are not easily tolerated, setting the stage for a reproduction of unjust social stratification through education (for an excellent example of this process in relation to the impact on First Nations people, see Eber Hampton's 1995 chapter, *Towards a Redefinition of Indian Education*).

Educational professionals are generally middle class, white, university educated, and have salaried positions within the educational structure. These professionals may therefore be biased towards North American middle class capacities, abilities, attitudes, demeanour, and culture, and students who appear to be a better 'fit' within the 'successful' evaluation category through use of

language, attitude, or classroom behaviour/posturing may do better than others. The institution of schooling and the educational professionals who function within it also make assumptions about things outside of school, such as how homes are supposed to operate, the kind of parents students should have, the level of exposure to and ease of using written language, and the acceptable proficiency of spoken and written English. One recent study showed that teachers perceived students with incarcerated parents to be less competent than students whose parents were not incarcerated, and that those perceptions had measurably negative impacts on academic performance (Dallaire, Ciccone, & Wilson, 2010; also see van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). These findings show how assumptions and expectations about potentially unrelated aspects of a student's life might impact their ability to succeed, simply based on teacher perception.

Further, rewards will be conferred upon those individuals demonstrating the particular attributes that fulfil the assumptions of the system and its operators. Because some students succeed in the meritocracy, other students must fail: the 'fair' distribution of marks and higher access must be maintained. The main point here is that the education system makes the assumption that everyone starts from the same place (i.e., a stereotypical white middle class environment, with the skills, vision, morals and understandings about the world), which is simply not true, and so those who start in the assumed 'normal' (upper-middle class) position will have an advantage over those who start anywhere below that

position. This is how deficit model thinking becomes socialized into the population at large.

## **PROBLEMS OF SCHOOL LABELLING**

Giving labels to students is a common practice in North American schools (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 1993; Sohbat, 2003). Authors in the fields of education (McDermott, 1996) and psychiatry (Dallos, Neale, & Strouthos, 1997) provide research into how deficit-oriented labels such as 'at-risk youth' can be damaging to the individuals who are burdened with them, and even some scholars in 'gifted' education suggest damage comes from these supposedly 'positive' labels (Robinson, 1986).

McDermott, in his chapter *The Acquisition of a Child by a Learning Disability* (1996), encourages readers to think critically not only about how disabilities and their associated labels are used in educational contexts in North America, but also about the fundamental ways in which our society maintains a meritocratic atmosphere of winners and losers in school based on a system of narrow and arbitrary competitive academic performances. Using Adam, an LD student, as an example, McDermott explains how Adam's LD label is showcased through the decreasing availability of supportive resources. In everyday life, if Adam needs to do something, he can easily ask a friend, a parent, an expert, consult a reference book, or go online to help him solve a problem. But in school, the supports available in everyday life are no longer allowed, and the reader learns how in cooking club, classroom lessons, and testing sessions the educational milieu provides decreasing access to resources, so that the final



testing session allows for only what is available within Adam's head. McDermott explains how:

...Adam's disability was not just visible in the sense that the world was a neutral medium for what he could not do, but that the world was precisely organized for making disability apparent, that he was the negative achievement of a school system that insisted that everyone do better than everyone else. (p. 273)

McDermott exposes the ways that educational competition requires both success and failure, and how this entire system of doing education is harmful to all learners in schools, but more so to those struggling with a negative label. The author describes the learning disability (LD) label as an entity given life by those who use it, and because this entity called LD exists, it works all by itself to acquire a certain percentage of the children in schools:

Although the folk theory has it that the traits (an inability to pay attention, an occasional lapse in word access, trouble with phonics, etc.) belong to the child and are the source of both the disordered behavior and the subsequent label, it is possible to argue that it is the labels that precede any child's entry into the world and that these labels, well-established resting places in adult conversations, stand poised to take their share from each new generation (p. 272).

These labels exist as particular categories in our social and educational world, and these labels will acquire youth so long as they are given "...life in the organization of tasks, skills, and evaluations in our schools" (McDermott, p. 271).

Although McDermott's (1996) focus is on LD, I see direct connections between the labelling of LD youth and youth with other deficit-oriented labels. In schools, knowledge is often narrowly defined (e.g., science-based, liberal, secular, instrumental) (Leiding, 2009), and knowledge is also considered scarce (e.g., competitive marking, bell curve distributions) (Bowers, 1997), both of which

work to exclude CLD children from being successful in schools. As was discussed at length in the previous sections, CLD youth often end up acquiring labels such as 'at-risk,' 'behaviour-problem,' or 'learning disabled,' and therefore are placed into alternative programs to receive remedial instruction because they are seen as inherently deficient. Once adhered to their academic record and to their self-image, the negative label is allowed to follow the young person through their school life, organizing their relationships within the entire institution with the hope that their thoughts and actions will change (i.e., improve academic performance, reduce aggression, improve resiliency, increase attendance, reduce substance use). Resistance to these labels by the youth themselves may exist, but I have not come across research that explores resistance to school labels and labelling in the literature. With that said, one recent study investigating marginalized secondary-school populations in the United States shows that active resistance to established authority is common (Baxter & Marina, 2008). Resistance to labels by alternative students appears to be an extremely important aspect of the labelling process, and I touch on this area in the future research section of Chapter 5.

Youth who have been marginalized due to racial, economic, linguistic and/or cultural diversity are not the only ones who are labelled in schools. For those students who are unlucky enough or otherwise unable to avoid a psychiatric label inscribing some form of mental illness, other research has shown how difficult that particular type of pathologizing label can be to remove. In their article, Dallos, Neale, and Strouthos (1997) suggest that:

...a family's resources, such as money, extended family support and friends, may shape the process of labelling...[t]he effect of such processes is that eventually the person assigned as the 'problem' may increasingly come to organize his or her identity around the label, leading to a 'psychiatric career' (Laing and Esterson, 1964; Scheff, 1974; White, 1995). This is seen to be shaped both by the meanings that others attach to the person's behaviour, their own internalization and, at least partly, voluntary compliance with these. However, once established, the extent to which people are capable of voluntarily altering their pathological labels is questionable. (p. 372-3)

This quote reveals how pathology assigned to individuals may be difficult to remove, not only from a structural perspective (i.e., systems of medicine, psychiatry, education, justice), but also from a personal identity perspective.

Later in the article, Dallos et al. state that even if a person is able to change the particular behaviour or attributes that allowed the label to be acquired in the first place, some pathological labels can be thought to be 'organic' in nature, and therefore essentially incurable (e.g., schizophrenia, ADHD, bi-polar). Once applied, and educational research in schools shows that these labels and placements into alternative settings are over-applied to minority youth (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), labels are difficult to remove from the psyche of the victim and from the educational structures within which they arise (Dallos et al., 1997).

As discussed above, the mark of a pathologized student may often be a negative school label such as 'problem behaviour,' ADHD, complex needs, or LD, among others. Although negative school labels and the act of applying these labels plays a role in the pathologization of students, it is important to note that labels do have a purpose within educational structures. For example, labels provide a conceptual and political space, as well as language and terminology,

for work to be done by acknowledging a particular need or problem. A label, such as vegetarian or vegan, can provide important information to other people about how to best relate to the person carrying that label, especially, in this instance, if that person is coming over for dinner. A major difference between a vegetarian label and negative school labels is that the label-bearer often chooses the vegetarian designation for themselves (at least in middle-class North American society), and acquiring a negative school label is a decision that marginalized students may have little control over (Baxter & Marina, 2008). Regardless, by labelling a disease that presents itself in people's bodies, communal work can be done by individuals and/or groups of people towards understanding, researching, and alleviating or curing that disease. A label can also be seen as a way to honor an issue, respect people who are involved or associated with that particular issue, and potentially can give some relief to the 'victim' (if it is a disease or social problem) who maybe better able to name and understand what is going on. A label also can carry with it access to assessment services, testing, funding, treatment, and/or specialized support services that otherwise might not be available. In terms of education and the labels of ADHD, LD, 'at-risk' or 'problem behaviour,' funding can be secured and services can be rendered through the educational institution, as can be seen in AOP. Another example of a mass intervention of marginalized youth can be found in the well-documented Head-Start program that exists in both the US and Canada. There is no doubt about superficial benefits people gain from many of the services available in our society through the labelling of diseases, issues and problems, but a deeper look

suggests that medical, deficit and actuarial models do not get at the roots of the issue.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of negative school labels is that students, teachers, parents, administrators, and social institutions (i.e., media outlets, political parties, academics, professional groups) often take the labels seriously, narrowing the conceptual and actual possibilities available to the label-bearer. This narrowing of possibilities through a focus on deficits can accumulate over time, so that low marks, apathy, reduced self-concept, and/or acting out in class, as recorded in school files and report cards that teachers and administrators create/have access to, tend to follow the student. This narrowing of the student's educational and life possibilities, as educational professionals shape the narratives around particular youth, influence the kind of response that the student's future educational professionals can and should have towards that youth.

## **CHAPTER TWO SUMMARY**

In this chapter we have seen how theoretical and empirical work on pathologization, deficit model thinking and negative school labels coalesce in complex and overlapping ways to position CLD youth on the margins of the school system. A common theme running through these theories is that CLD youth are positioned at these margins by educational professionals, who 'describe, explain, predict and prescribe' both the deficits and the interventions, thereby fixing individual students through special/alternative programs. The mainstream school programs are not designed to be flexible enough to accept

diverse or alternative expressions of language, culture and knowledge. Further, the action of these processes obscure the reality, which is that the inherent power relationships that exist in society and schools, and the assumptions about what CLD youth are capable of, ensure that alternative students fail more frequently than their mainstream counterparts. The power relationships serve those in power, and those who exercise power in the society are the ones who are least likely to see the power dynamics (Delpit, 2006). These power dynamics, played out as they are in education, reproduces the current unjust socio-economic and political order.

Knowing all of this, the question remains how to best investigate the ways these processes are 'given institutional life' (McDermott, 1996) at different levels of the education system that deal with alternative programs and students. Indeed, what are good ways to research the language of educational professionals within the institution itself, and see the deficit model thinking and pathologization occurring alongside the negative school labels that have been discussed in the literature? Chapter 3 discusses the methods I have used to empirically explore the confluence of these different pathways, and Chapter 4 details the paradoxical ways these processes are enacted in various settings in alternative education practice in BC.

## **CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the integrated research methods employed for the entire dissertation, providing a step-by-step overview of how I merged the earlier AOP data with the information I collected from NHS, LSB and MOE employees. The first section is a reflection upon my approach to the research and the methods as a whole, revealing the pathways I took to find the paradoxical relationships existing at the different levels of the BC alternative education hierarchy. Following these reflections, I discuss design choice, research ethics, site and participant selection, and data analysis, outlining the stages by which data was collected, analyzed, and inscribed as results. I conclude the chapter with some thoughts on how I avoided some of the more common forms of research bias.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PATH**

The path I took to explore the central ideas in this dissertation became a rather winding and circuitous one, but was a trail that ultimately provided some important views and lessons about alternative and mainstream education in British Columbia and my role as an educator and researcher in the field. From the very beginning of my original work at AOP when I was first approached by the BOD to design and implement their research agenda, I had a sense that the questions guiding the BOD inquiry were not directly aligned with what I myself

was interested in. The BOD questions, probing very specific attributes of their former students' life experiences, were generated from within a particular paradigm that framed students in ways that I was not entirely comfortable with. For example, by asking former AOP students questions about their criminal behaviour/record and substance use habits before, during and after their time at AOP, without expressing any curiosity into their home lives and the reasons why they came to and then left the program (or what background conditions/realities brought them to be doing crimes/using drugs in the first place), the person who is being interviewed becomes fractured and understood only through several narrow facets. By asking about their successes and failures, the participants become framed within the discourse of risk, either 'beating the odds' or 'living down to expectations.' As was explained in Chapter 2, this discourse of risk is complicit with the processes of pathologization, deficit model thinking, and negative school labels. I would argue that this paradigm and associated approaches to research undermine the complexity of the real issues at work within the whole lives of these young people, the staff at AOP, and alternative and mainstream education in general. This is not necessarily the BOD's fault, because they are operating from a particular mode of being where assumptions of youth at-risk, academic success, and risk factors are culturally normalized (i.e., unquestioned) ways of making sense of the world. However, ignoring the critique of this discourse in the research itself allows schools to continue to slot youth into categories of success and failure based on society's norms. It is possible that I could have suggested alternative perspectives about the students and the



program to the BOD, but I did not have the experience or foresight to speak towards what I was feeling in my gut at that time. The BOD had specific questions and I tried to give specific answers, but I was uncomfortable with both in terms of what they implied about the young people I was working with and about myself in terms of the kind of researcher that I was.

The interview questions provided by the staff at AOP were more open-ended than those provided by the BOD, and were also less problematic for me in terms of the way they framed the students (see the second half of the interview protocol in Appendix A). The staff were curious to know about issues of safety and trust, adult relationships, the emphasis on working with others and building teamwork, and how AOP improved attendance and engagement at school. These foci expanded on the BOD questions in terms of what could be known about the program, the staff and the students, and gave access to more of the processes that were operating 'under the surface.' Although I was less conflicted with the staff questions in terms of what my final goals were for the research, I still felt at the time a desire to look at and then push beyond these 'local' impacts upon the students in AOP in order to investigate more institutional elements of alternative schools and language that positions youth within these structures.

In my work to answer the questions for the BOD and the staff, I knew there was more going on at AOP specifically and in BC alternative programs in general that would give greater understanding, but I wasn't sure which path to take or where potential paths of inquiry might lead. Doing the early work at AOP for the BOD and the staff helped me establish a much stronger sense of what I

was interested in, and the focus on labelling, pathologization, and deficit model thinking came looming up to the forefront over the time I was working for the AOP BOD.

My research questions kept changing as I uncovered more and more of the thoughts, feelings and actions of the people involved at AOP. Each series of research questions were addressed in turn, as they appeared to have prominence at different stages of the study. For instance, the BOD questions were the ones I was being paid to investigate, and so those took the main focus early in the research and in the presentation of the findings for the program evaluation. The staff questions, being posed alongside the BOD questions, but seen as somewhat subsidiary to the BOD emphasis, were broached originally in the interviews but later extended and elaborated on in a focus group that I completed with a third of the former AOP student interviewees. After I realized that I wanted to go deeper into the language and practices of alternative education in terms of labelling, pathology and deficits located within students, I was following a new set of questions. I contacted new participants, and collected another round of data. Each of these evolutions brought me closer to what I really wanted do, and in this way each step provided a foundation by which to further refine and focus my research questions. I did not know early on that the study would grow in the way that it did, and luckily I chose a research design that was flexible enough to respond to the expanding/changing questions and directions of the study (see the Case Study Design section below).

## **CASE STUDY DESIGN**

In order to address the research questions originally requested by the AOP BOD and staff, an approach was needed that would allow for a degree of flexibility in data collection and maintain a balance of breadth (large volumes of information were being sought across questions) and depth (specific areas of the research required rich data for deep understanding). A case study, which investigates a specific contemporary social phenomenon from within its real-life context and thereby allowing a researcher to essentially become an expert on the phenomenon studied (Yin, 2003), appeared to be a good choice of design. The case study method focuses deeply on one particular unit of analysis, for example, a child, a school, or a household, that can then provide the possibility of generalizing towards a larger population that the individual unit belongs to (Cohen & Manion, 1995). Using this approach, as much data as possible is collected from the specified context using a variety of methods, including but not limited to interviews, surveys, focus groups, observation, archival research, artifact collection, field notes, and document analysis (Yin, 2003).

Case study research is generally considered to be an ongoing process, offering opportunities to incorporate issues raised during the research into the findings, and the possibility of doing further investigations into areas that had previously not been considered (Yin, 2003). Comprehensiveness is a key feature of the well-executed case study, as the researcher should explore and understand both the individual experiences of the participants, as well as capture an overall understanding of the group experience of the phenomenon under

study (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2003). In pursuit of this 'group experience' and overarching themes, I cast a wide net to include data from the early work completed at AOP, as well as data from the administrative- and policy-level participants who were asked to speak directly to the labelling of youth in alternative programs.

As mentioned earlier, the case study design proved to be very flexible, allowing me to expand the research into new areas based on previously collected data. It was an excellent design that fit this research project well because it provided me with the space to look critically at the details of the individual program (AOP), and then gather more information about the aspects of the social phenomena (i.e., pathologization, labelling) that were of central concern to me as a researcher in the field. Although most of the early results from the early AOP research were too narrow and somewhat tangential to what became the main direction of the research path, those earlier findings did provide a platform from which to see further afield. From this platform I could envision a trajectory for the dissertation that would provide a stronger and more critical understanding of alternative education.

## **RESEARCH ETHICS**

In order for any member of the academic community at Simon Fraser University (SFU) to conduct research with human subjects, the researcher must apply for approval through the office of research ethics. This review has been set up in order to minimize or remove the risk of harm to research participants. As a PhD student, I was required to fill out a series of forms describing who the

participants of the study were going to be, how they would be recruited, how I planned to acquire informed consent from the participants, what harm and/or benefits, if any, could possibly come to the participants, as well what other institutions I would need to get approval from. The office of research ethics at SFU approved my application, allowing me to proceed with data collection on the condition that I first get approval (and provide documentation of that approval) from the local school board (LSB) to which AOP was affiliated. I was already in the process of applying for approval from LSB when I received the conditional approval from the SFU office of research ethics.

In order to conduct research within the local school district, any potential researcher must apply for and gain approval from the LSB research committee. I adapted the information I had submitted to the SFU office of research ethics to fit within the framework outlined by the LSB. I then submitted the application to the LSB and was granted approval, the letter from which I copied and submitted to the SFU office of research ethics. After they had received the approval letter from the LSB, I was allowed to proceed with the research and collect data from employees of the LSB. I should note that as my research agenda expanded from the specific work at AOP to the broader investigations into paradoxical relationships at various levels of alternative education in British Columbia, I continued to adhere to the protocols of the ethics review. The original adult informed consent forms and research information sheets were general enough to cover the new participants and new areas of investigation. Please see Appendix B for the informed consent form used with participants.

Throughout this dissertation, in accordance with the promises I made to AOP, individual participants, the SFU office of research ethics and the LSB, I have kept all participants' names confidential and anonymous (pseudonyms have been used). All reasonable attempts have been made to protect the identity of the alternative school, AOP staff, former AOP students, LSB employees and ministry employees who participated in this study. To provide a sense of realism to the individual pseudonyms I have given to the participants, last names were created and used that reflect the cultural background of the participant.

## **SITE AND PARTICIPANTS**

### **Site Selections**

The selection of the original site for this doctoral research requires some background information. As was discussed in Chapter 1, my Masters research on wilderness therapy had left me with a strong curiosity towards understanding more prevention-based models of working with 'at-risk' labelled youth, especially in wilderness settings. Having a desire to work with youth in the community, I began volunteering for AOP, an alternative high school that enrolled 'at-risk' youth who: a) felt the physical outdoor activities offered at AOP would be a good fit for them, b) were referred to the program by a counsellor or other educational or justice professional, or c) did not seem to fit in at one of the other alternative programs in the LSB catchment area. Located in two portables and in the basement of another building on the campus of an urban secondary school, AOP has roughly 40 students enrolled each year across grades 10, 11 and 12. The neighbourhood surrounding the school has a large immigrant population, and has

a relatively high percentage of the municipality's social housing projects. Seven full-time staff run the program: 2 classroom teachers, 2 clinically-trained Masters-level therapists, 2 youth and family workers, and 1 wilderness instructor.

After three months of volunteering for AOP, several representatives from the BOD approached me, asking if I would be interested in conducting a program evaluation. As I had not found a doctoral research project by that time and was concerned about the progress I was making in my program, I was interested in the possibility of using this evaluation as my doctoral project. The area of alternative education was exciting to me, I enjoyed working with the program staff and students, and I was intrigued by the prospect of giving something back to the program and the community. I also had a sense that my own perspective and practices as an educator would change in the process of doing the research with AOP, but I had little concept of how that shift might take place.

After I had completed the final report for the AOP BOD and understood how negatively that original work was being viewed by the BOD, I naturally started considering how I might move forward with the research in terms of how to complete this dissertation. As I explained in the introduction, it was at this point that I considered new directions and rounds of data collection, pushing into the language and processes of pathologization and deficit model thinking of educational professionals. Because I already had so much information about the inner workings of one alternative program in BC, I decided to seek out participants at the school board- and ministry-levels to see what else I could

learn about the labelling process. Those sites (the school board and the ministry) became my next areas of exploration.

### **Participant Selections**

The goal for the AOP research sample and participants was to include as many former AOP students as possible who were willing to show up for a face-to-face interview, followed by a focus group with as many original interviewees as possible. By the end of earlier data collection period, 20 former AOP students had been interviewed, which, according to the documentation provided by the program staff and the administrators at the high school where the program was located, accounts for roughly 20% of the total population the original research was trying to reach. During that initial work I also spent considerable time with the staff and other volunteers at AOP, and conducted informal interviews and a focus group with the staff.

As the direction of research changed requiring the collection of new data, I searched for individuals who were instrumental in administrating and/or influencing alternative education policy in the province. On this new tack, I collected data from three levels of alternative education in the province: staff and administrators at AOP and NHS, administrators at the LSB office, and policy analysts in special and alternative education working at the provincial MOE. By seeking individuals at multiple levels of the educational bureaucracy in the province, I hoped to get a glimpse of how particular labels were being ascribed to individuals, and whether the educational professionals themselves were aware of the potential harm labels created. Please note that all proper names describing



participants of the research in this dissertation are pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of the individuals, as well as their associated programs, organizations and schools. Please refer to Appendix E for a reference list of all participant pseudonyms.

## **DATA SOURCES**

I relied upon four main data sources in the creation of the results of the research. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that multiple data sources can help to decrease the likelihood that bias will slip into assertions and conclusions. Accepting this advice, I included data from interviews, discussions with AOP staff, program and ministry documentation (i.e., documents provided by AOP staff, administrators and staff of NHS, and policy documents from the LSB and ministry employees), and program observation. The ways that each of these was collected and how each provided material and insight for the results are outlined in the sub-sections immediately below.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Getting a sense of a person by seeing their face, clothes, and demeanour, as well as physically engaging with them in a conversation has been suggested to be an excellent way to come to know participants and the phenomenon under study (Fontana & Frey, 1998). Knowing that face-to-face interviews would allow me to gain a solid understanding of each participant's perspective, I relied most heavily on this source to provide me with a rich data set on alternative education. Survey data was rejected as too impersonal, and I decided to only conduct

telephone interviews if meeting in person was not possible. Out of the 25 interviews I conducted with participants in this study, I only completed two over the phone.

Interview protocols were semi-structured, meaning that although I would attempt to cover all of the interview questions, I had some room to add or drop questions if they seemed to be relevant/irrelevant for the particular participant, or rephrase questions to fit the personality or life experience of the participant (Fontana & Frey, 1998). With the former AOP students I often altered the wording of open-ended questions in order to match the question to the personality and demeanour of the particular participant I was interviewing. While structured interviews are formal events where the researcher is attempting to get very specific answers to scripted questions, semi-structured interviews are more flexible, in that the researcher is able to pursue relevant tangents that might appear to give access to information close to the focus of the research (Fontana & Frey, 1998). I took advantage of this flexibility during most interviews, and often asked clarifying questions in order to follow emerging themes potentially important for fleshing out understanding on the research questions.

A total of 19 interviews were conducted with 20 former AOP students (in one interview there were two former students present), and all of these early interviews were recorded on digital voice recorders for transcription at a later time. These participants were usually very candid with their responses, and forthcoming about many aspects of AOP, alternative programs, and their lived experience working or being in the school system.

A total of five interviews were conducted with five different authorities affiliated with alternative programs in BC. Of these five, three interviews were held with personnel directly associated with AOP: the principal of NHS (Nathan Marietti), the district principal of alternative programs for the LSB that has jurisdiction over AOP (Bill Schmidt), and one of the two therapists at AOP (Tom Carrick). These three were recorded on digital voice recorders for later transcription. Further, I had a telephone interview with each of two policy analysts at the BC Ministry of Education (Lisa Bogan and Tracy Rasé), who are responsible for developing alternative education policy in the province. These last two interviews were not recorded, but copious notes were taken during each one.

Each interview protocol for these last five was tailored for the individual(s) being interviewed, but in general I asked questions about labelling and pathologization of students in alternative programs in British Columbia. I also asked many other questions hoping to gather information about funding for alternative education, the positive and negative impacts of labels, educational funding categories, and various levels of intervention programs in use in the province. Please see Appendix C for the full range of questions I prepared for Tom Carrick, the Grade 10 classroom therapist at AOP, and Appendix D for those I prepared for Bill Schmidt, the district principal of alternative programs of the LSB. I emailed the interview protocol to both Tom and Bill prior to their interviews, and Tom sought information concerning the questions from other staff at AOP prior to our interview. The interview protocols used with other participants were related with the two protocols found in Appendices E and F.

## **Discussions with AOP Staff**

Before and during the earlier research, I kept in close contact with the staff at AOP. When I had questions about the participants I was interviewing or about various aspects of the program, I went to AOP and talked to the staff. I estimate that I had at least 15 informal discussions with one or more of the AOP staff about various aspects of the program, and worked to clarify my understanding of how the program was run, what the central vision was, and other specific pieces of information about students, processes and philosophies. I mostly used the transcriptions and notes from these discussions to bolster my confidence in the validity of findings from other sources.

## **Documentation**

Scholars reflecting on the use of qualitative research designs, including case studies, suggest document and artifact collection from the context under study in order for researchers to get a more complete picture of the issues being investigated (Hodder, 1998). Towards this end I gathered end-of-year reports, website descriptions, brochures, and other documents that described the nature and process of AOP. I received most of these documents from the staff at AOP, but I also received documentation from the BOD, from administrators at NHS, from the LSB website, from the policy analysts at the MOE and from the MOE website. I used these documents both to better understand the overarching missions, goals and visions of AOP, NHS, LSB and the MOE. Documentation gave me a wider lens with which to view and understand these entities involved

in alternative education, and simultaneously gave me important data about graduation rates, inclusion policies, funding processes, among others.

### **Program Observation**

A more common term for this method of data collection is participant observation, but because the participants of this study were not necessarily directly observed (many of the interviewees were not actually in the program during my observation sessions), I am calling it program observation (I observed the workings of the program directly). Having volunteered for 18 months at one alternative program (AOP), I spent a large number of hours getting to know the students and staff there. By my estimates, I spent between 350 and 400 hours immersed in the program between October 2006 and October 2008, covering 21 separate day-long out trips, one 10-day wilderness canoe trip, three half-day classroom visits and at least 20 separate meetings and discussions with the BOD and staff). It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of my time volunteering with the program was prior to the start of the research, and so my 'observation' was much more casual than the standard methods of participant observation.

Because 90% of my time 'observing' the program was in the role of volunteer, I did not have any conflicts between my identity as a volunteer and my identity as a researcher. While volunteering, I did my best to learn and use similar outdoor techniques, eat the same food, use similar gear, and participate in all of the individual and group activities while present at AOP. At the same time, I felt a slight distance from the staff and students because I was not entirely

sure how much responsibility I had for the students and activities that were ongoing at the program. I was warmly accepted in my role as volunteer and created friendships with the staff and many of the students. Since I was not a staff member, in the eyes of the students I suspect I held a less threatening and probably less respectable position than the staff: I was not there all the time, did not do any disciplining, and was able to be more friendly or neutral with students even in the midst of a particular conflict (although I was required to intervene in several conflicts towards the end of my time at AOP).

I kept an informal journal of my experiences with students and staff where I reflected on the program and its processes. During the data analysis phase of the research and the generation of the findings, I used my program observation memories and journal entries to weigh the results that were emerging from the interview data. The research notes themselves did not change much in frequency or content over the course of my volunteering and my research. As I stepped out of my volunteer role and into my researcher role (there were about three months of overlap between the two while I was still volunteering with AOP), I tried to keep present in my mind that at the program I was a volunteer, and when I was interviewing former students, I was a researcher. Of course, it was impossible to fully separate these experiences, as my research was looking directly at the program, its processes and the relationships between staff and students. However, as I did not have informed consent from any of the students who were enrolled in the program at the time, I did not do formal 'participant observation' so as not to transgress any ethical boundaries. This is the reason why I kept my

note taking to a minimum, at least concerning things I saw while I was at the program.

Being an intimate part of the program helped me learn the 'language' of the school, the written and unwritten codes of ethics, as well as the dynamics of the relationships between students and between students and staff. This access helped me to develop the interview protocol for the former AOP students, more effectively situate and analyze former student interviews and staff discussions, and better frame the focus groups. Similar to ethnographic research, I had been immersed in the setting, and as a volunteer I gained a level of interaction with staff and students that helped me form insights into how and why certain practices and processes were in place.

### **Focus Groups**

Beyond the interviews, two focus groups were conducted at AOP: one with staff and one with former AOP students who had previously participated in an interview. Focus groups provide group interaction in a guided data collection session (Berg, 2007). Focus groups can also be a good way of validating the analysis and findings of data by giving participants an opportunity to reflect, comment, contradict or clarify on the results based on their earlier reports (Morgan, 1997).

Several months after the presentation to the BOD with the original AOP case study report, I attempted to contact all of the original 20 former AOP student interviewees to garner interest in a two-hour focus group session. I wanted to get

as many of the original interviewees into the room as possible so that the greatest volume and range of feedback to the findings could be given. I decided that providing a free sushi dinner in one of the AOP classrooms in the evening time would be sufficient incentive for generating interviewee participation. I had several dates in mind, and after making three rounds of phone calls to interviewees I was able to get a verbal agreement from eight original interviewees to come to the focus group on a particular weekday evening. Of these eight, seven actually showed up for and participated in the event, one third of the total number of interviewees. The average time between the focus group and the attending participants' interviews was one year and four months.

The staff focus group occurred after I had presented all of the original AOP findings to them in a meeting held one and a half years after my presentation to the BOD. After my presentation to the staff, we had a collective, unplanned one-hour conversation about many aspects of the program, with our discussion ranging from the lived reality of AOP students, to explications of the processes and policies at AOP, to the politics and economics of alternative education, among other topics.

## **TRIANGULATION**

Triangulation is a social scientific method of focusing on a research concept(s) or issue(s) from multiple perspectives, thereby increasing the understanding one has about the phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998); in the social sciences, it is one method of alternate validation. Flick (1992), in an article discussing triangulation, posits that having a collection of



methods, materials and perspectives within one study is a strategy that adds strength and rigor to the entire investigation (p. 194). As Flick suggests, the final results became more complete and comprehensive through this action of triangulation; having multiple data sources allows the researcher to more accurately say what is going on within the context of the study, in this case the people and processes within AOP, and the documents and words from participants, programs and organizations included in the research.

## **ANALYSIS**

A three-phased process based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) rubric was used to analyze the data generated by the four main data sources (pp. 10-12). In a previous study where I used a case study, I also used Miles and Huberman's analysis, and felt comfortable working with the data from the current study using this method. More importantly, the approach appears to be a good fit for the kind and amount of data collected in this study because Miles and Huberman's suggestions are intentionally flexible, adaptable and malleable to those working in convoluted social contexts. By offering a range of possible techniques, tools and resources to use within their three-phased cyclical framework of analysis, these authors give a researcher much leeway to self-reflectively construct the results of their investigation. As Miles and Huberman remark about methods of analysis: "...any method that works...that will produce clear, verifiable, credible meanings from a set of qualitative data...is grist for our mill..." (p. 3).

Miles and Huberman (1994) specify a three-tiered approach, moving through: 1) data reduction, 2) data display, and 3) conclusion drawing and verification. These phases, although clearly delineated by the activities occurring in each, are to be interrelated with and dependent upon each other. In other words, data reduction (transcription, reading through raw data, preliminary note taking) is ongoing as data displays (generation of alternative ways of viewing, reading, understanding the data) are being constructed, and the actions of both data reduction and display continue while conclusions are being drawn and verified. I moved through these three phases in the manner described, returning and re-returning to the original data set on an ongoing basis in order to maintain the recursive, cyclical methods suggested by the authors.

My preliminary step of analysis was the transcription of all data into digital formats (mostly MS Word documents). This 'hands-on' contact with the information I was collecting, after first hearing it aloud in each interview/focus group or first reading it on a website or policy document provided a broad, sweeping view of the different perspectives from the participants about alternative education, labelling, and their lives in connection to these processes.

The goal of the case study is thoroughness (Yin, 2003), and Miles Huberman (1994) recommend cycling through their three phases of analysis, and in this way the method of analysis was a good fit for the case study. The first 'data reduction' step after the preparation of the MS Word documents was reading through those documents for specific words, phrases, and remarks that spoke directly towards the themes of the research, namely examples of

pathologization, deficit model thinking, and labelling. Second and third 'cycles' of the research were similar, but were perhaps more about verifying that what I had originally seen was valid, while at the same time looking for more evidence or support for the themes. Without a background or much confidence in design, I decided to use matrices (or tables) for the second 'data display' step, inserting condensed answers to questions, quotes and notes into a data matrix, providing me with a convenient, central and organized display. Copying and pasting sections of data under the different themes, and moving various pieces of data as new ideas came to light gave me a stronger sense of what I was looking at. The third step consisted of a re-writing and summarizing of the disparate pieces of data by thematic finding. During these three steps, analysis was generally reflective, interpretative, and cyclical as Miles and Huberman recommend.

In the first step, interview recordings and research reflections were transcribed into MS Word documents, with each interview and reflection having its own document. Once all interviews, focus groups and documents were transcribed, the most salient responses from each participant and document were paraphrased and inserted into a box in an MS Excel spreadsheet, generating a matrix containing a wide range of data. This matrix served as an organizational display of the data, and it allowed me to move through the data in a consistent manner and consider various themes as they emerged. These steps felt natural to me and were relatively simple to follow.

As the participants were diverse in terms of life experience (18 years old vs. middle aged), position and power within the structure of alternative education

(student vs. teacher vs. school administrator vs. ministry employee), and capacity for self reflection (very self-reflexive vs. little awareness of self), some data sources and participants provided either more and less access to what I was looking for than others. In this regard, I simply tried to be diligent in reading and re-reading the different accounts of what was happening in the various realms that alternative education was occurring in, grouping the range of answers with the theoretical themes. For example, there were a tremendous number of different answers to question 35 in the former AOP student interview protocol: “Do you feel that the staff cared about you at the Alternative Outdoor Program? Why do you feel this way?” All former students I spoke to responded affirmatively, and participants were generally keen to provide justification for their answer. By reading through all of the justifications a few times, by now copied and pasted into a matrix, patterns emerged which could be described as ‘themes’ of the research (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this example, 50% of the participants stated in some fashion that the staff were supportive of them, and this constituted some form of care in their opinion. 45% stated that the staff were involved in their lives in a way that few other adults were, and specific participant examples included being called at home if they missed school, staff picking up the student from home to bring them to school or on a trip, staff taking students out to a movie or meal if students were experiencing difficulty at home, and staff calling students if they were sick both to check to make sure the student was ok and to verify that the illness was not being faked. It was these kinds of patterns that I clustered into themes for review

to determine how, if at all, they impacted pathologization, deficit model thinking or labelling in some way so as to be included in the findings.

After transcription and entering pieces of data into the data display, I felt I was in a middle/late part of the analysis. Moving through this data in the tables, I tried to weigh the importance of different elements and processes of AOP, participant recollections on how students acquired/absorbed/resisted various labels, teacher understandings of and responses to student behaviour, and policy definitions of alternative students, all in an attempt to sort through compelling and competing ideas about the central themes. I tried to look at and understand both elements of 'spoken truth' that each participant was sharing openly in their responses, as well as things that were not being said or being skipped over. I felt that reading and remembering the pauses and the jumps in thought, I might find sensitive or salient topics through patterns of avoidance, or else deeper held assumptions of these processes that were taken for granted and therefore not spoken of.

The time that I had spent at AOP working with the staff and students significantly increased my capacity to feel beyond the surface of the words of the participants, and grasp towards the underlying messages that were coming through the data and analyses. Having that personal, intimate knowledge of the inner workings of at least one alternate program gave the results a richness, texture and depth, and also allowed me to confidently offer interpretations and suggestions.

## RESEARCH BIAS

In conducting qualitative research, it is important to understand the multiple sources of bias that can weaken the findings of a study, as well as common mistakes. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) offer reflections on one pitfall that should be avoided by researchers in the field. These authors suggest, citing Goetz and LeCompte (1994) (as well as Eisner, 1992) that there is an inherent danger of the investigator generating a 'logical, plausible story' (p. 245) by connecting different parts of the data until there are no gaps left to be filled. Further, emphasis is often placed more heavily on an emerging theme if it makes logical sense and also appears to fit existing beliefs/understandings either within the researcher's own head or within the literature, or both. The story then may begin to take on a life of its own, moving beyond the reality of its concrete reality. Further to this, three major research biases noted by Miles and Huberman (1994) are: 1) the holistic fallacy – interpreting events as more patterned and congruent than they really are, 2) the elite bias – overweighting data from articulate, well-informed, high-status participants and under-representing data from less-articulate or lower-status participants, and 3) going native – losing one's perspective or accepting explanations and perceptions held by local participants from outside the stance of the researcher (p. 263). There are other biases involved in qualitative research, but these three, being the most prevalent and pervasive, appear to be in highest need of being addressed.

In general, the first step to mitigating the dangers posed by these biases in terms of their impact on data collection and analysis is being aware of them. Researcher awareness can provide a base level of protection from bias, but the trouble is that bias can occur surreptitiously, without an investigator having conscious awareness of it. For example, researchers may find subtle patterns in a data set and overemphasize their importance (as Goetz and LeCompte discuss above), they may base findings on an incomplete data set, discover what they were unconsciously looking for in the first place, or over-rely on others' judgments, real or assumed (Gilovich, 1991). One extension of bias awareness is Foucault's hyper-vigilant pessimism (see Blenkinsop, in review), which encourages a person to assume the worst (i.e., that one has/embodies bias) and therefore must remain hyper-vigilant to its presence and subsequent attempts at removing the bias.

More specifically, I feel that in regards to the elite bias, I am relatively safe. I spoke directly with former students, although I admit that there were students who did not want to talk with me, or clearly had a difficult time at the program but did not make it into the study. The data set likely is biased, but I tried hard to include as many different kinds of voices as possible to avoid the elite bias. In terms of the going native bias, again, the data is not in great danger of being weakened in this way. I was definitely immersed as a volunteer in the program for a year and a half, but about the time I was starting to collect data in earnest, I was no longer very present on site. The former AOP students had between 6 months and 5 years to reflect on their experience after leaving AOP, and they

were under no obligation to anyone to share information in any particular way. The participants in administrative and policy roles did have vested interests in holding a particular ideology, but by contrasting the sometimes widely different opinions and assumptions of each, I held a meta-perspective from which to view the data set.

### **CHAPTER THREE SUMMARY**

This chapter explained exactly how the research was realized, addressing practical and theoretical issues. A case study approach was selected, with the data sources being interviews former AOP students, AOP staff, NHS and LSB administrators, and policy analysts from the MOE; focus groups with former AOP students and AOP staff; program observation; and documentation. A three-tiered data analysis method outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) was described, and discussions of research bias were included. The next chapter presents the results of my analyses of the data.



## **CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS**

### **PARADOXICAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Data analysis revealed findings of two sets of paradoxical relationships existing between students, staff, administrators and policy workers within the alternative education hierarchy in British Columbia. The results show how the attitudes, behaviours and language use of these educational professionals, in the application of their work, simultaneously help and hinder students; the help and support, although real, is reactionary and ultimately superficial, at least when compared to the hindering aspects, where deeper and long-term regeneration of processes that hold CLD youth in ‘underclass’ positions occur. Further, the paradoxical relationships that are played out by professionals within the system appear to be inherent aspects of institutional education. If education really does reproduce harmful perspectives and associated actions through institutional forms and educational professionals, as suggested in Chapter 2, and if a more just and humane society is of interest to the educational endeavour, then real pathways that directly address the inherent paradoxes are necessary. While the relationships themselves are discussed and debated here in Chapter 4, wider implications for education are presented in Chapter 5.

Before moving into the findings themselves, a short description and definition of the term paradox will help situate our thinking. A paradox is defined in Webster’s College Dictionary (Costello, 1992) as:

- a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that expresses a possible truth.
- a self-contradictory and false proposition.
- a person, thing, or situation, exhibiting an apparently contradictory nature.
- an opinion or statement contrary to commonly accepted opinion. (p. 980)

The four definitions of this term show that the central understanding of paradox revolves around contradictions, although there is some room for interpretation depending on the usage. In light of the findings I discuss below, I am interested in how the interactions of staff, administrators, policy makers and students, within the case of AOP and the educational bureaucracy of British Columbia, are contradictory, especially in relation to commonly accepted assumptions about the educational process (i.e., school is where students learn what they need to know to improve their own life and their society, public education provides support for all students equally).

The etymology of paradox comes from Greek: para = beyond; dox (from orthodox) = customary, conventional, established (Costello, 1992). In this way, I use the term paradox to describe the contradictions between the established and/or commonly-held goals and beliefs about alternative education, and those aspects of language and practice that work beyond or against those goals and beliefs. In other words I have found opposing, contrasting and inharmonious aspects of the established, conventional and socially acceptable understandings of education, within the words and practices of those involved in alternative settings for students. These opposites exist side by side, operating within the

same spaces and actors. Thus, teachers, administrators and policy workers in the educational bureaucracy appear to be working at cross-purposes to themselves and the larger goals of education and society.

Even after a series of thorough searches in educational research databases, I had a difficult time finding results or discussions of paradox and/or contradictions in the literature on alternative education, with two notable exceptions, Vadeboncoeur (2009) and Kim (2006). Vadeboncoeur's (2009) ethnographic study, investigating the ways that alternative education programs can be conceived as 'spaces of difference,' presents an in-depth qualitative inquiry into three different alternative schools, one in Australia, one in Canada, and one in the United States. Her analysis is spatial and geographic, showing the ways that the alternative schooling space itself both addresses particular 'needs' while simultaneously recreating the environment within which youth are negatively framed. She writes:

...alternative programs are contradictory: On one hand, participation in these programs enables epistemological, ontological, and axiological positions for youth that are not typically available in formal schooling; and, on the other, the production of these spaces is entailed by processes embedded in schooling that function to displace difference. Embedded in the production of alternative programs are tensions that arise between a democratic ideal of public education and a neo-liberal economic rationality that maintains the "sorting machine" function of compulsory schooling (p. 281).

Vadeboncoeur ultimately makes an economic argument against the ways that capitalism as a system negatively impacts students marginalized through schooling practice. Her analysis suggests that alternative schools provide both

possibilities and risks to the students, and these cycles will continue because of capitalistic models used by the society. Kim (2006), using a narrative analysis, presents six different voices from within an alternative school in Arizona, USA (i.e., a security guard, the principal, a teacher, two students, and the researcher/self) in an attempt to reveal the conflicting perspectives that operate in alternative education. By giving equal space and weight to each of the six distinct people, and their associated positions, thoughts, ideas and perceptions of the school, contradictions are readily apparent. Kim's work shows how authority figures re-create the familiar and traditional authoritarian school structure, while students appear to want more than a disciplinarian relationship with adults at their alternative school and something different for their educational experience. Kim's analysis suggests that adults attempt give what they think students need, but they appear to go against what students perceive as their self-determination and self-respect. These two pieces were the only empirical works that I could find that were speaking towards the idea of contradiction and paradox within alternative school settings. The current work complements these pieces, providing a greater number of student voices, and voices of administrators and policy makers, to the dialogue.

## **PARADOX 1: STUDENT-STAFF RELATIONSHIP**

My conversations with and observations of former students and current staff from AOP generated overlapping stories of expectations, truths, actions, and reasons for actions, which, when taken together, suggest a paradoxical relationship between students and staff. Former student perceptions of both

supportive and non-supportive actions and language from staff at the program, along with the ways that staff interpreted and explained their actions and beliefs about students, are presented here. Issues of power, control, authority, care, support and trauma are woven together to create a shifting platform from which various interpretations are worked together. Fundamentally in this first paradox, I try to expose three aspects of the paradoxical relationship that is created between staff and students at AOP, and how different elements of the relationships help and/or hinder students. The heart of this paradox lies in the exploration of how both students and staff at the program have come to develop various techniques and strategies for working with and understanding each other, especially in light of the institutionalized power and control issues inherent to alternative education. As examples of this paradox, I first share ideas of care and support, then explore issues of discipline and ‘tough love,’ and finally discuss the concept of coping.

### **Care and Support**

Former AOP students expressed in their interviews and in the focus group how they felt cared for by staff in a variety of ways, and how this caring through deep involvement formed familial relationships between staff and students. Staff data confirms the intentionality of this caring and relational approach to the students in the program, and represents one aspect of the paradox. The reason why this care is important to note, in light of the pathologization, deficit model thinking and negative school labels discussed in Chapter 2, is that it is so strongly and uniformly given and received by the students and staff at AOP. It

gives one facet of the alternative education milieu, and a strong one at that, to bounce other (less caring) behaviours off of later.

Matt Walker, a former AOP student, when asked what was the best moment of his K to 12 schooling experience, said that it was the time he was taken out to a movie by Ben Pilster, the head teacher for the Grade 11/12 classroom at AOP. Matt's parents were going through a divorce at the time, and Ben spent the day with Matt to make sure Matt knew he had a person and a place to turn to if things got really bad at home. This is the kind of response that we all would hope for in a teacher who was presented with a similar situation by one of their students. Although each of us likely has stories of encountering this kind of teacher or teachers in their years in school, the AOP staff are methodical in generating a strong environment of care. The fact that the staff wanted me to include a question in the interview specifically asking about whether or not former students felt cared for suggests that it is a focus in the program, and the unanimous agreement among all former student participants that they did indeed feel cared for in a variety of ways makes a strong case.

The care at AOP was not simply a general feeling, as former students were able to clearly articulate the ways they were cared for. For example, former students expressed how staff always appeared to be vigilant for any difficult issues that might be arising in students' lives. Autumn Pemara, another former AOP student, sheds light on this process in a quote from her interview:

If anyone was to feel bad or had a sad look on their face, [the staff] would notice right away and come and talk to you about it

immediately. They would keep you there until they found out what was wrong, and you would stay in that office until it was worked out.

Here we see a former student's perception of staff as deeply involved, engaged, and caring, in this instance allegedly encouraging a student to stay within the supportive environment of the program until the issue was resolved in some way. In these examples from Matt and Autumn, we can see how the staff are there for students during times of crisis. The support is tangible, and students see other students being helped both through the counselling and by other genuine gestures of care by staff when students need it. Beyond crises, the attributes of an alternative classroom such as a low student-staff ratio (6:1 at AOP), the regularity of seeing the same students and staff in one classroom all day/everyday, and a focus on group process and shared goals appear to work synergistically to set a tone of consistency, stability and safety for students and staff. Scholars in the field of alternative education support this finding (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 2001).

One reason why staff show this form of care to students is because the staff know that if they can attempt to address the underlying emotional issues of students and have students bond to them in meaningful ways, then students will be better equipped to handle not only school, but, perhaps more importantly, life after school. Tom Carrick, the therapist for the Grade 10 classroom at AOP, explained the first part of this process in his interview:

It's not because [the students are] dumb, or that they don't know how to do the school work. It's because they are so distracted by all the stress that is going on outside of school. So if you help to start relieve some of that stress, which is about new ways of coping with

it, all of a sudden they can focus on school. [F]or you and I sitting here, if stuff is not right at home, working on anything is...really hard. So it's the same type of thing.

And he continued:

...if things aren't going well outside of school, then they aren't going well inside of school. Parents say, 'All we want is for [our child] to go to school.' And I say 'That's all you want for them?!' [Staff] are thinking, 'What kind of person do they want to be?,' not 'What kind of career do they want?' Jobs, careers, and everything else all gets figured out, once they have a sense of who they are...once they learn how to cope with stuff a little bit more.

In this sense, Tom is expressing how staff generally approach students at AOP, from the perspective that the stress students are feeling from their situations outside of school, such as parental conflict, parental separation, anxiety over living situations, substance addictions, and even hunger, are a part of what makes school so challenging for them. It makes sense that focusing on an English 11 assignment might be difficult for a student who is stressed by thinking about going home to an abusive mother, or if a student is hungry and eating dinner that night is not guaranteed. One of the things that Tom and I agreed on in our interview was that in our own lives, if things were stressful at home, we had a hard time staying focused on work or anything else.

Although tangential to the main flow of the paradox argument being presented in this section, it is important to connect these ideas with the theories discussed in Chapter 2. The pathologization critique is relevant to include here, showing at least one way that sad, abused, angry and/or hungry students act out at school because they are getting to a point in their lives when they are not



willing to live under various kinds of stress any longer. Tom explained how this process sometimes works:

...we get kids who when they hit high school, they hit the wall. ... And there is...a lot of stuff going on at home [in primary school], but they don't really know what to do or don't have the skills to do anything about it, and so they just sit in it. But when they get to high school, they say "I am not going to put up with this shit anymore. I am going to raise a stink." And so they start to act with bad behaviour. And what I see there is that..."Something is not right here. I am feeling uncomfortable. I don't know exactly what it is, but I'm uncomfortable. And when I'm uncomfortable, I get mad."

This anger, and other emotions, can lead to lack of focus, apathy, skipping school, substance use/abuse, aggressive actions towards teachers or peers, or other extreme behaviours. These issues, if left unaddressed or if they get serious enough, will bring an institutional intervention, namely a disciplinary action, a negative label, and/or placement into an alternative education program (or potentially a referral to another alternative program in the LSB district if the student is currently already enrolled in an alternative program). Indeed, for the students in AOP, this has already happened. The hungry, abused, mentally ill, and/or poor student becomes transformed into the LD, the 'problem behaviour' child, the 'at-risk' student, or the youth with 'complex needs.' These students 'get mad' to use Tom's words, and their acting out brings swift reprisal from teachers and school administrators.

From a deficit model perspective, the individual student carries the structural burden of their abuse, class, race, socio-economic, and immigration status through their label and/or provincially-provided educational funding category; all students in BC belong to a ministry funding category, but those

students seen to have more, or more complex, needs can be designated as such to provide more funding to the school district within which that student is located (BC Ministry of Education, 2010b). In addition to the yearly base K to 12 student funding allocation of \$6,740 provided by the MOE, extra funding, in the amount of \$9,207, is available for every appropriately documented student exhibiting 'extreme behavioural needs' (BC Ministry of Education, 2010b). What does this allocation of labels and resources mean to the young person who is trying to make sense of their life in relation to a mainstream school system that doesn't seem to care about them? As Waterhouse (2007) reports, high school students in alternative education settings in British Columbia generally experience few expressions of 'authentic' caring prior to their move to an alternate context. The transition from elementary to high school, from one classroom and one teacher to many classrooms and many teachers can be difficult, and some students (i.e., CLD youth) face more of a challenge making that leap than others.

Returning to the main paradox, findings from the early work at AOP show that staff are deeply immersed in the lives of students, and the relationships cultivated at AOP were felt by students to be familial in nature. The staff appeared to be extremely present in their students' lives, and the interview data corresponding to care from and trust in the staff reflects that. Joanie Lee, a former AOP student, when asked why she felt the staff cared about her, explained: "The lengths that they will go to, outside of their...obligations in regards to their jobs, were showing that there were a lot of things that they would do for us, that they didn't have to do...The staff always were going out of their

way for us.” Stephanie Dorst, another former AOP student, responded this way to the same question:

They were just straight, and honest. They did anything that they could to help, you know. If you said that you needed help, then they would be there any time. If you were willing to get the help, and that you knew that you needed it, than they would bend over backwards to help you... anytime.

The former AOP student participants in this study mentioned often how staff were prone to pick up late and absent students from home (or from a boyfriend’s or girlfriend’s house, or from a street corner) in order to either bring them to school or bring them along on an out trip. It was related to me numerous times that the staff would visit struggling students and their families on weekends or before or after school (usually numerous times) in an attempt to stay connected to the student and to help resolve difficult situations. Chelsea Klein reflected:

I was going through a point in my life when everything was a mess. And my apartment reflected that...my headspace. It was messy. And [one instructor] came over and helped me clean it. And that definitely showed me they cared.

So here we see the staff involvement as generating a perception of care in students. This is important because care is not only considered to be a fundamental human need (Gordon, Benner, & Noddings, 1996; Noddings, 1992), but is also tied to helping these particular youth to become more successful in and out of school (Waterhouse, 2007). Regardless of the realm of success or how success for these youth is defined (i.e., less drug use, more pro-social behaviour, reduced crime, improved marks), a high level of care appears to give

these young people an anchor in the world, especially for those who did not experience much of that kind of care outside of school.

If the staff are trying to help students cope with the stress of their lives outside of school in order to help students be self-reliant and cope with an abusive dad, or no dad, or a neglectful dad, for example, it makes sense that staff work towards developing lasting connections with their students. Indeed, what kind of model or example can staff be for students if the students do not feel cared for by the staff? AOP staff work hard to generate strong and apparently trusting relationships so that the students feel cared for, setting a particular kind of example for students who may not have many healthy relationships. For instance, Tom said in his interview:

That's the hard part of working with these students. You get the kids to want to change their life because they want to be around you. Everyone always says to them 'Don't do this, don't do that. You shouldn't do this.' I don't want to be one of those people who says: 'I don't want to have to lecture you, BUT...' and then they lecture you. As soon as I hear that 'but' I want to throw up in my mouth. It is all about relationships at AOP. The academics are secondary, the [outdoor] trips are secondary. All of those things happen, and they happen very well, because there are relationships.

The short weekly outdoor trips and the longer wilderness trips that AOP runs are helpful in this relationship-building capacity, and Tom explains that in further depth here after I asked him about how familial relationships between students and staff relate to the trips:

In relation to the connection between the family aspect of things and the trips, if we were just at school...the relationship would be the same. But because we make memories together and experience these [trips], we get closer. And people who are closer

in my life, are people I have done a lot of things with. And in a sense that is how families should be. We make memories together. We're uncomfortable together...we spend a lot of time. Last year it was a terrible time, the kids flipped [their canoes] over, they freaked out, and then we could take care of them. We all took care of each other. ...[I]n the moment they all hated it, but now when we hear them talk about it everyone laughs. So through those memories we really bond. And kids get to see the teachers in real life. And they see us when we are uncomfortable.

So in the process of creating relationship, one of the important parts is seeing each other in all of the ways humans can be, including joy, sadness, frustration, stress, discomfort, and excitement. For the staff, the challenge and memories of these trips are an important way to build familial connections with individual students and the group.

So the argument I am building in this first facet of this first paradox is that staff at AOP work to create long-term caring relationships with their students. Towards this end, staff appear to be going above and beyond what was generally expected of them compared to teachers and support staff in mainstream schools, at least in the eyes of their students. It is the caring relationships and the safe, warm, and familial environment created by staff that former AOP students are sensing and remembering with such vividness, and it is these relationships with adults that help transform their lives in ways that students feel are beneficial and positive.

In sharp contrast to the caring, supportive, and therapeutic aspects of the program related by former students and staff, there is another aspect of the data set that complicates the issue. Although staff practice care, it is done so in simultaneously with an air of authority, control, hard lessons, and tough love. In

important ways, these young people are still seen as youth with behaviour problems who cannot be trusted; the staff act on that assumption and provide disciplinary action does not seem to be caring on its face. This contradictory facet of the relationship existing between the staff and the students at AOP is explained next.

### **Tough Love**

In contrast to the positive aspects of their reflections of staff, former AOP students also expressed the ways that staff generated animosity among the students, and acted in ways that were potentially contradictory to the cultivation of a caring atmosphere. Program observation supports these comments, and examples are presented here concerning the staff's use of 'natural consequences' (i.e., appropriate dress/eating while on trips) and physical discipline (i.e., push-ups, running laps) to deal with student behaviour problems. In this subsection I analyze the animosity, discipline, and unfairness that staff were noted as creating by the former students. This part of the paradox will ultimately be discussing how staff techniques can be seen as a form of 'tough love,' and connections are drawn to theory and possible implications.

In the student focus group, during a discussion of outdoor trips, I asked if there were any negative aspects to the trips that had not been brought up yet. In response, several participants commented about the animosity that the staff could bring to the program. For example, Colin said:

I personally think that the teachers create animosity between students. Like, on the last [canoe] trip, at Silver lakes, we all...there

were two to a [cooking] group and there were eight groups. And after the 8th day, Jeremy ran out of food, and so for two days he didn't have any food. And at the very end of the trip, it turns out [instructors] Ben and Erick had like two big...huge reserves, huge bags of food...but wouldn't give it to him, because...just to teach him a lesson, right? Ben would be like "[The other students are] eating, Jeremy. What are you going to do?"

Chelsea responded directly to Colin's idea of staff giving hard lessons to students by saying: "That happened a lot, actually." In reality, Jeremy did have access to food from his classmates, but from the reflections of the other former AOP students, the staff are seen to be teaching a hard lesson by not providing food from their own reserves. My interpretation is that the staff were not intending to create animosity in anyone, although that may have been a side-consequence of their decision not to give some of their reserve food to Jeremy, but rather, as Colin suggests, to teach Jeremy a lesson. Namely, if you don't pack enough food, or, in this case, if you ration your food poorly, as Jeremy did, you'll be hungry. The law of natural consequences prevailed on the AOP out trips, and this is perhaps one example of this practice. Indeed, Chelsea went on to say: "I'm sure the next trip that Jeremy went on, he packed more than enough food." I suspect Chelsea was right, or Jeremy at least learned to ration his food more carefully. Regardless, the staff were often rigid in their decisions, and could take a hard line with students, especially the Grade 11/12 classroom teacher, Ben. This hard line was not just for 'natural consequences,' but also for most rule infractions. Once a punishment was issued or a decision was made by a staff member, that generally marked the end of the discussion; AOP staff were usually consistent in their approach to students. Students and staff might discuss the

event later, but in the moment, I observed that any questioning of or resistance to a directive from a staff member would usually lead to increases in punishment severity.

Beyond the lessons staff might have been trying to provide, former AOP students also commented about how gruff and 'hard' the staff could be. My observations corroborated this, where I witnessed several events with staff being sarcastic and belittling towards students. Part of this might be because the students were often abrasive and resistant to staff, and perhaps the tough exterior of the staff was in response to the sometimes aggressive and/or devious student behaviour. It was also explained to me that staying hard and stoic in the face of extreme student behaviour was an important attribute of staff for creating positive change in students. Tom said in his interview:

So like, if a teenager loses it, especially with their parents...they don't want the parent to lose it. They want the adult to look like they are in control. And the kid has a sense that if the adult loses it also, it can just become a big debate. And now it is [the adult's] fault, because [the adult] can't control [themselves]. So it's important to keep control of your emotions at AOP. If there is an argument, and a kid says, "You were [getting upset] too," then the parent loses status. It basically makes the parent the same as the kid. At AOP, when consequences are given out, it is all done non-emotionally. And even when a student acts out, if we can stay calm, then that acting out, that student's behaviour becomes very isolated. All the lights and sirens are going off over here, but not with the adults, and not anywhere else in the classroom.

So the warmth, care and support that staff exhibit can be tempered and cooled by hard and stoic personas, all of which appear to serve the staff in providing a particular kind of environment that the staff believe will best support their students at particular moments. I should note that this strategy might also



improve and/or support the emotional stability of the staff, because students who are frequently acting out or behaving belligerently can be emotionally draining to instructors working with them. Core AOP staff, who have stayed the same for more than 5 years, appear to be an anomaly within alternative programs which normally see a relatively high staff turnover rate (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). I should note that often in programs like AOP, staff are specifically trained not to trust the students, and act in ways that will ensure the safety and 'well-being' of both students and staff. The idea is to at least not *fully* trust students, in light of the fact that a lot of these young people are very skilled at manipulating trust relationships. This lack of trust really pushes on the notion of care that is discussed in the first part of this paradox. For the staff, care might mean being harshly authoritarian, rigid, and not fully trusting of students, because at least with these actions there is the sense, and often the reality, of a safe and controlled space for all involved. It is important to ponder, however, what the real costs of this kind of care are, especially if students are not fully trusted and may be manipulated into thinking harsh punishment is 'good for them.' Indeed, AOP students have been placed in alternative education through marginalizing processes over their years in school. Although these kinds of programs are designed to help students, the 'at-risk' AOP student who is assumed by staff to be manipulative, untrustworthy, and embodying particular deficits definitely seems to indicate that deficit-model thinking is being 'given institutional life' at AOP.

Perhaps in response to these tough personas, former AOP students reported that staff did not always seem to have students' best interest in mind.

Another story related by Colin in the focus group went like this:

...there was this one time that we had to do yoga. And everyone in the class wanted the window open, and [the head teacher] Ben didn't, right? And one student got up to open it... And so everyone wanted to have the window open, and Ben was just having a bad day, and Ben kicked that student out of the class. Just as an example.

Program observation notes confirm this kind of 'bad day' scenario, with Ben described as sometimes being too quick in handing out punishment to students who defied his authority. In responding to an interview question about things the staff may have done that were not appropriate, Jason Choi, a former AOP student, said:

[Staff] would usually be either strict on just one kid... or on a group of kids. Or maybe the classroom as a whole. So they were really unfair sometimes. But that was only at times... and sometimes, you know... Ben you can tell is totally having a bad day... And the other kids would say to you 'Ben is having a bad day,' and on some of those days he would come up with the most ridiculous things that you would have to do... that doesn't even make sense, you know? He would just come up with really bad bad punishments, that you don't even really deserve.

So clearly some students in their reflections on the program saw room for improvement in terms of staff disciplinary behaviour. From these comments it appears that Ben may have been an oddity in the program in terms of his rapport with students, but I witnessed events involving other staff giving out seemingly unwarranted amounts of physical punishment, mainly push-ups. On a larger level, this is concerning in terms of how AOP staff are willing, at least in some

ways, to permit Ben to have 'bad days' with students, as if 'cutting Ben some slack' was a good thing overall, or turning a blind eye to the ways that Ben's actions could be potentially harmful to students.

A relevant finding to include here from the staff data is that a potentially harsh or extreme response/punishment from a staff member was sometimes seen to be a good thing from the perspective of other staff. For example, Tom, the Grade 10 classroom counsellor, states that when the head teacher Ben responds to a student by giving out a serious punishment, the reaction from the student might be that the student reaches out for help:

So Ben can drop a bomb like that on [a student], and it can send them into turmoil, and then they come and talk to [the counsellors]. Right? And Ben is very non-emotional, and that is part of it too.

In this way, a disproportionate response (i.e., a 'bomb') to student behaviour is not necessarily seen as a negative aspect of the program, or a negative aspect of the teacher, at least as far as staff are concerned. It is possible that students were being pushed hard in this way 'for their own good,' in order to drive them either towards the AOP therapists or in hopes that a student response would then be able to provide an opportunity for a lesson. It is not clear whether Ben was intentionally trying to drive students to see the therapists through his actions, although from my own observations I suspect that he was not. Program observation suggests that Ben would respond to students in this way for the purpose of maintaining a stable and controlled group of students, although clearly his 'bad days' were a problem, at least for students.

Staff at AOP often gave out physical punishments for minor rule infractions, with the most common punishments being either 50 push-ups or running a lap around the field behind the portable buildings that AOP was located in. Offenses included, but were not limited to swearing, rough-housing with other students, not paying attention to a staff member, showing up to class late, talking back to a staff member, doing something unsafe on an out trip, or making a glib remark in class. I was told by staff that all students were given a set of expectations and rules from their first day at the program, although students related that sometimes punishment severity was not always proportional to the rule infraction (see Jason Choi's comments above). For example, at the end of a daylong snowshoeing out-trip, I observed a student complete 500 push-ups in a parking lot in front of the rest of the students. The student had repeated an unsafe act (intentionally falling head-down into a tree-well on a snowy day) multiple times after being asked to stop multiple times by a staff member. The staff member had stipulated that the push-ups must be done before anyone could get back into the vans to go back to school, and so we all waited and watched as this student did their 500 push-ups. In this case, the staff member had rapidly increased the number of push-ups after each time the student disobeyed, but because the snow was not conducive to push-ups, agreed that the push-ups could be done on the wet, but hard, pavement by the vans. It is interesting to note that this is not actually creating a natural consequence, even in relation to the failure to follow safety guidelines. In this way we can see some

of the disconnect between rules, expectations, rule infractions, and the paradoxical messages between care and discipline from staff.

The staff were relatively authoritarian in their approach to discipline, and observations suggest that keeping control of student behaviour was a regular issue for staff. In light of the power differentials between students and staff, I was curious to know how much control the students had over the kind of punishment given to students, and especially how much input, or even understanding, the students had over which behaviour might precipitate which punishment. Asking the staff in their focus group about how much control the students had over the rules and punishments, the response from Vince, the Grade 10 classroom teacher, was this:

The rules for the program were set up a long time ago by [head teacher] Ben and [Grade 11/12 classroom counselor] Erick...so the rules are rather set, and the kids get some choices, over small things, but not over big things. The kids will have suggestions, but we usually just say, 'Yeah, we tried that, and this is what happened. So now we do it this way.'

Essentially, the students are not involved in setting their own consequences, and rules were set up prior to students' arrival at the program. Erick goes a little further and says:

...the rules and expectations are set up right from the beginning, right from the first interview with a new potential student. Many of the rules are LSB rules, especially no smoking, no drugs and no alcohol.

But even if the rules of the program are set out from the very first intake interview with a potential student of the program, it is not clear if staff discuss with potential students that they might be doing a lot of push-ups and laps for misbehaviour, or

exactly what they might be running laps or doing push-ups for. In this way, there might be some very different understandings of the meaning of discipline and authority between the staff and the students. The work of Kreutter (1983) suggests that there is indeed a wide margin between the way educators think, and therefore act, about discipline, and the way students think about, and therefore respond to, the wielding of discipline by educators. This is confirmed by the work of Thorson (1996), who found that common discipline techniques in a mainstream high school, at least as reported by the 14 students (seven mainstream students, seven special education students) in her study, were generally felt to be ineffective. Discipline was seen to be ineffective because Thorson's participants considered some school rules to be unfair (i.e., only the Grade 11 and 12 students were allowed to leave campus) and other rules were enforced unfairly. Suggestions from Thorson's participants included having students, teachers and administrators work as a community to come up with rules and discipline structures together, and also have students involved in campus clean up and maintenance activities to help students take responsibility for the school grounds and facilities.

Readers at this point likely are sensing some of the complexity surrounding the practices of 'care' and the practices of 'authority/discipline' shown by staff at AOP. One interpretation is that these contradictory actions are actually two sides of the same coin. Taken together, these two processes might be seen as a kind of 'tough love' strategy, where the staff show care by creating a safe environment, keeping order, reducing/addressing conflicts in the moment,

and sometimes being extremely firm with students even to the point of disrespect; at AOP, the perceived safety of the group trumps respect. The staff in this way can be seen as exhibiting and enacting a style of caring relationship the entire time, even when disciplining students to the tune of 500 push ups, or doing things that may, in the moment, seem detrimental or traumatic to student well-being. The students, in turn, often appear to see negative responses or authoritarian discipline from teachers as 'for my own good,' usually at some point after the incident has occurred (i.e., after the program has ended). It was as though the staff 'cared enough' to call students on their issues when other people in the students' lives perhaps could not or would not do that; student behaviour and actions had brought them to the alternate system, and so staff was sure to help address presenting issues. In this way, staff would push students through to a place where these young people could take more responsibility for their actions. Certainly there is a case to be made for the 'tough love' argument, and also for the 'I'm doing this for your own good' mentality of the staff that students appear to appreciate. As a case in point, many of the former AOP student participants felt like this approach 'worked' for them because the staff could be seen to have the best interest of the students at heart. The staff are 'tough' because they want students to take responsibility for themselves, as well as to keep the classroom, students, and other staff safe. This might be a necessary form of care at this kind of alternative program. It is important to remember that schools often reflect the values of the society, and so staff might be 'preparing' students for the real world. Staff may care enough about the students to make

sure that students can 'take it,' and see for themselves how they are able to cope and survive. I am not entirely convinced by this preparation for coping argument, as will be shown in the Coping and the 'North' American Dream section below (the last aspect of Paradox 1).

I ultimately see these kinds of justifications (i.e., 'tough love,' 'for your own good,' 'I needed that kind of discipline') for the behaviour as a superficial explanation, and I think this 'tough love' part of the paradox reveals that something deeper is going on. Paradoxes should give us pause to think and consider what more is going on under the surface, and they require a closer look to notice and analyze some of the nuances occurring within the context. Social institutions have, in some ways, created these young people and their behaviour, and alternative education professionals may have to use 'tough love' in order to push students through the school system and help them be 'successful' once they are out. I think everyone would agree that reducing the likelihood of anti-social characteristics in people is a definite positive for the society. However, I feel conflicted about these arguments because the 'tough love' for these young people appears to me to be overly harsh and reactionary at times, and also appeared to help kids cope, but not necessarily thrive after their time at AOP.

Taking my own advice and broadening the lens somewhat to increase my perspective, these findings suggest that AOP, and other alternative programs, do two things that are not discussed by anyone involved: 1) they keep CLD youth within the confines of a school campus and therefore off of the streets, increasing the capacity for the control and surveillance of this group (see Lesko, 2001, for



more on youth surveillance), and 2) they provide remedial curriculum at a reduced pace, ensuring that graduation numbers will decrease for these youth. These actions, of course, are not a part of any overtly stated agenda, and professionals who wield power over students within the institution are the ones least likely to see this interpretation (Delpit, 2006). Pushing further, it appears that these youth are being generated, in a way, as an underclass of people in the society: only 25% of the former AOP students who I interviewed had graduated with their dogwood diploma, and although 80% of these participants had intentions to go back to school, only 25% had done so. Their academic and economic lives have become stunted through the processes operating in education.

I might suggest at this point that a particular interpretation of McDermott's (1996) and Vadeboncoeur's (2009) arguments around student labels, alternative schools, and economics can provide us with a view of how the competitive, capitalistic model that is played out in the meritocracy of schools is served by having an underclass. Unsuccessful students in mainstream schools will be sorted into various alternative programs in the LSB area. The vast majority of these will not obtain a diploma (although some may gain a school leaving certificate which does not carry much capital in the system), providing fodder with which to fill the gaps in low-paying service industries. Although the former AOP students provided many high aspirations for themselves in their interviews, it was hard to see how all of them might realistically attain their aspirations without a high school diploma.

The point for this subsection of Paradox 1 is that there are beliefs and actions by AOP staff that contrast sharply with the sense of familial care mentioned in the previous subsection. Although these first two subsections of the paradox do provide some evidence of deficit model thinking and pathologization of students, the implications of tough love seem to suggest something deeper going on. Perhaps another way to think about how this process is played out is that the palliative care from AOP helps students to feel better about themselves and improve their confidence and coping through the counselling and outdoor activities, in spite of deficit modeling and negative labels. The alternative programs and funding categories and labels in the province will continue to stratify student populations if they are given operational life in our educational institutions (McDermott, 1996), so the band-aid gets placed by caring staff over the massive wounds of each successive generation of alternate youth with 'complex needs.' McDermott's (1996) arguments, overlaid on the findings, suggest that education, as a social institution existing within modern political realities, have a vested interest in keeping a certain percentage of youth from being successful in the mainstream sense of the word. If a competitive and capitalistic worldview is the dominant one for this society, then education will reflect that belief system. This worldview assumes and anticipates winners and losers, and so if 20% of the population is failing school, that is not only expected, but necessary to ensure that the rest can be seen as being successful in comparison. The bar is set at the level of middle and upper class values, and those who are unable to jump that high do not receive the benefit of the system.

## **Coping and the ‘North’ American Dream**

The last attribute that emerged from the data in terms of the paradoxical relationship between students and staff at AOP was the concept of ‘coping’ that staff at AOP stated as a characteristic they tried to instil in students. Tom, the Grade 10 therapist, expressed in several quotes from his interview how staff worked to help students cope with whatever stressful situations they were dealing with outside (and inside) of school. Coping is defined as the ability to “face and deal with responsibilities or problems, especially calmly or adequately” (Costello, 1992, p. 300). It is associated with resiliency, emotional strength, and the ability to put negative aspects of life aside in order to pursue long-term goals or successfully address immediate concerns. Although likely considered a desirable trait for many people, it has been suggested by at least one critical theorist (McGinnis, 2009) that for marginalized youth in alternative education contexts, merely ‘coping’ with the school reality might consist of silent acceptance of the status quo. This acceptance can reduce a student’s ability to resist a particular, usually low, social position, and also reduce their ability to connect to and thrive with/within their own family, culture, first language, and heritage. The goal for this final subsection of Paradox 1 on student-staff relationships is to explore the ways in which the thoughts and actions around coping are paradoxical in alternative education settings.

Theresa McGinnis (2009), in her article titled *Seeing possible futures: Khmer youth and the discourse of the American dream*, writes about ethnic Khmer high school students in the North-East of the United States whose parents

are migrant agricultural workers from Cambodia. McGinnis is interested in understanding how Khmer-American school children accept or resist what she describes as the American dream, a dream that I will argue is actually a *North American Dream* that, at least in some respects, includes the Canadian context. McGinnis explores "...the messages embedded within the Discourse of the American Dream and juxtaposes the one-dimensional message of hard work with the complexities of urban immigrant life" (p. 63). The author suggests that the American Dream is made up of personal effort, the belief in meritocracy, and the possibility of upward mobility for people from any social class. In other words, through strenuous effort and resiliency in the face of adversity, any person can find success within the academic and employment institutions of North America. McGinnis states:

For example, the beliefs embedded in the American Dream, such as meritocracy, individual hard work, and social mobility, have become what Fairclough (1989) calls a dominant discourse. The status of being a dominant discourse enables the ideology to be considered commonsense practice, allowing the values and beliefs embedded in the American Dream to be privileged and to go unquestioned by many. (p. 63)

This idea suggests that Americans live in an egalitarian society, and that autonomous individuals in the society are able to succeed regardless of their class, race, gender, language, or heritage. The central tenet of this theory is the assumption that everyone in the society, although starting at different levels of the socio-economic hierarchy, is given an equal chance at success through their academic work in the public education system. In her research, McGinnis (2009) shows how individual students in the Migrant Education Program (MEP, a

pseudonym given by McGinnis) are expected to be agents of their own success or failure regardless of their immediate surroundings or personal circumstances, thereby diverting attention away from the role institutions play in the construct of success or failure. MEP, as an inner city school for the children of immigrant seasonal labourers, is an alternative program designed to provide resources to marginalized youth. McGinnis writes:

Indeed, the families in this study lived in...poverty-stricken neighborhoods, and the children attended urban schools that had been labeled as "failing" by state officials. However, educational institutions remain focused on individual potentials, denying "the degree to which circumstances and institutional sorting plays a role in the kind of access, opportunities, and resources an individual has available to them" (Olsen 1997, p. 249). Thus, messages are circulated to poor, immigrant youth, without any interrogation of the social structures that exclude and silence (Olsen 1997). (p. 63-64)

McGinnis' argument about the problematics of the discourse of the American Dream in relation to alternative educational settings for marginalized youth seems to be applicable to all of North America, in that it maintains an assumption about the equality of access and possibility of success for all people. In reality, different social groups are deeply stratified along racial, economic and cultural lines in both the United States and Canada. Although there is little to no emphasis, at least historically, of 'rugged individualism' in the Canadian social contest (see Lipset, 1991, p. 91), and certainly more examples of socialized support systems working to help those most in need of social assistance (i.e., students, recent immigrants, poor families, mentally ill, victims of trauma), my data suggests the alternative education system in Canada is similar to that of the United States. As Oakes mentions in the forward to Deidre Kelly's (1993) book

concerning the Canadian context of alternate education, these programs tend to maintain educational, political, and socio-economic inequalities, continuing a process of schooling that is subservient to, and less scrutinized than, the mainstream system.

Another part of this ideology that McGinnis critiques is the continual possibility of success regardless of social class, upheld by the 'rags to riches' narratives circulated in popular culture. In this sense, AOP students, similar to McGinnis' students enrolled in MEP, absorb, reflect and/or deflect that ideology, and in the ways that they absorb it, they are expected, and expect of themselves, to be autonomous individuals capable of 'success' regardless of their class, race, gender, religion, culture, socio-economic status, and first language. Similarly, students who are abused or neglected at home but do not face the economic or linguistic obstacles of other alternative students may still have significant difficulty realizing mainstream success. These ideas are reflected in the interviews: staff were generally cited as believing in the students in terms of their success, meaning that staff believed all students could succeed at whatever task they hoped to accomplish, regardless of circumstances. Heather Gouseman, a former AOP student, in response to an interview question about why Ben could be so harsh on students, remarked: "...[Ben] is only being that way because he really wants you to achieve." Not only is this reminiscent of the previous subsection of this paradox in terms of students feeling teacher 'harshness' in a positive light, but it also points out the level to which the staff push this idea of achievement and success.

Vince Tilder, the grade 10 classroom teacher, and Sagar Gumptra, the grade 10 classroom youth and family worker, each stated separately in the staff focus group that students come to AOP because they could not cope with all of the issues they were experiencing at school and at home. Tom believed that the staff role was to help students cope with the reality of their lives. As he stated in his interview: “So if you help to start to relieve some of that stress, which is about new ways of coping with [stress at home], all of a sudden they can focus on school.” Similarly, students felt that staff believed that students were capable and responsible for themselves, and could succeed if they would only apply themselves. Heather Gouseman, for example, when asked in her interview what the main message of staff was to students, replied: “That they believed in me. That I could succeed at whatever I put my mind to.” For the same question, Jeremy Reid, another former AOP student, said: “To succeed. Like just to be positive, and to succeed. There was a huge amount of stuff around being positive and trustworthy.” To the same question, former AOP student Alex Ravinsky stated: “I guess for me, just to...to try to put out your best. Just...with hard work, you know, comes benefits...”

The belief, however, that AOP students are expected to be agents of their own success or failure, at least partially diverts student, teacher, administrator and society’s attention away from the role that institutions play in the success/failure construct touched on by McDermott (1996) in Chapter 2. The reality is that many of these alternative students, especially those who are poor, are starting far behind their mainstream counterparts (Berliner, 2006). This final

aspect of Paradox 1 is saying, in part, that although alternative students are being told/shown that they can do or be anything, it simply is not true. Data from former AOP student interviews show that although 85% of these participants were able to find and keep employment, 88% of these worked in the service industry (i.e., dishwashers, security guards, baristas, manual laborers). As mentioned previously, only 25% had graduated with their diploma and only 25% had been enrolled or graduated from a post-secondary institution. The undercurrent of the North American Dream occurring in BC alternate programs ignores 'structural determinants' such as poor educational facilities, inner city/inexperienced teachers, watered-down curriculum and teacher-dominant pedagogies (McGinnis, 2009) for youth who cannot avoid them due to their life circumstances. This final aspect of the paradox reveals how the emphasis by AOP staff to have students work hard, reaching within themselves to find 'success' regardless of their lived reality allows for all involved to place blame, again, on the individual student for not trying hard enough or having enough motivation, thereby letting institutional processes off the hook. McGinnis elaborates here:

The emphases on the belief of intrinsic motivation and abilities to cope are beliefs that underlie several other presentations provided to these Khmer youth. The belief of intrinsic motivation is also inherent in the discourses used by public school educators who often noted "laziness" as the reason why students were failing their classes. Importantly, however, these beliefs as presented to the youth trivialize the lived experiences of the youth while glossing over institutional social and cultural barriers. (p. 69)

The same can be said for AOP students, some of who actually described themselves as 'lazy' in their interviews. For example, Joey Chen, in response to



a question about the challenge of the academics at AOP, said: “It was a good challenge for me... but because of my habits I can get really lazy and it becomes a challenge for me when I let it pile up.” Likewise, to the same question, Colin said: “...I could have been way more [academically] successful... if I had tried. I didn’t try as hard as I could have.” Tom was quoted earlier as saying failure wasn’t about laziness, but rather stress in students’ lives and the ability, or lack of ability, to cope with that stress. But as we see here, coping may just be a way of having students internalize the blame for their lack of mainstream success, and it is clear that most AOP students, even if they graduate, lack that success. Part of it may also be that lack of emphasis on academics at AOP may lead otherwise motivated students to become apathetic and ‘lazy.’ If the curriculum is watered down and overly-integrated in ways that are not meaningful or relevant to students, the students themselves may disengage academically, regardless of how ‘successful’ they are being in that kind of school.

It is important to also acknowledge an opposing argument, which says that if educators fail to push for independent students who are able to cope and succeed regardless of the obstacles they face, then the education system will allow students to develop a sense of dependency and/or entitlement. I would argue that there is a middle ground that must be sought between self-reliance/independence and dependency/entitlement. It is true that society does not want to generate dependency through the education system, but currently harm is generated through the education system because of the ways different groups of students are treated in school, depending on how well they cope with

reactions to their SES status, race, ethnicity, whether or not they are abused, or proficiency with written and oral English. Alternative students, who Freire (2003) might describe as the oppressed (e.g., students in a non-liberatory or dialogical education system), need to know they are oppressed in order to challenge and overcome it, but will not see it that way if aspects of the North American Dream ideology are continually interwoven into their life at school. If students have a self-narrative of laziness and apathy that propagates self-blame, and their only option is to 'be strong, cope and do work hard' in the face of their challenges, then there is little room to escape from the unconscious belief of this meta-narrative. My data shows that many AOP students, regardless of whether or not they believe it, see the staff as helping students to realize they can overcome anything if they simply try hard enough. Hard work will certainly help any student overcome challenges they face and likely improve academic performance if used in school, but many students start far below the upper- and middle-class-based expressions of academic excellence so comfortably practiced by their mainstream peers. There are instances where an alternate or marginalized student does indeed achieve 'mainstream' success, but these kinds of stories, I would argue, are the exceptions to the rule of social reproduction through schooling. Coping itself paradoxically helps some individuals to actualize mainstream success, but likely harms many other alternative students by having them believe they are ultimately responsible for their own success or failure regardless of the structural impediments that reduce their ability to succeed.

Readers may see here a contradiction within the contradiction, where 'mainstream success' may not be the best thing for alternative students to achieve, at least if the project of alternate education is attempting to consider and improve the possibilities of students who do not 'fit' into mainstream schools, especially future students who have not yet been slotted into marginal spaces. From this perspective, as people who acquire mainstream success and begin enjoying the benefits of that ideology and lifestyle, they may be more likely to become complacent and thankful that they are not one of those who are struggling (i.e., part of the underclass). Alternative schools do a poor job of meeting the 'complex needs' of their students because the problems run deeper than the school; indeed, we are looking at deep systemic problems that are being addressed only after the fact.

If coping and success are being pushed by staff at AOP and other alternative programs in the province, who is witnessing and working to undo the ways that these kinds of programs actually absorb and divert social resistance to prevailing power structures? If students at AOP are learning how to be thankful for lessons in how to cope with and survive the difficulties of their life situations, they are swallowing the North American Dream ideology. Without a strong resistance to the assumptions and attitudes that may negatively impact their life, such as the power dynamics that operate in the society (see the discussion of Delpit, 2006, in Chapter 5 below), they may be more likely to passively accept their role in social order and merely appreciate the space they have been provided with.

## **Paradox 1 Summary**

Through these three different aspects of the staff-student relationship at AOP, I have tried to show the paradoxical milieu within which these groups of people work and live. As a school that embodies a 'last chance' to get a high school diploma for many young people, AOP characterizes the deep contractions running through education and society. The learning and ideological processes operating within all of education, which may be due to the monstrous and dehumanizing scale of the institution itself (Finger and Asún, 2001, citing Illich's work), causes all of the work and energy of schools to go into maintaining the illusion that the current forms of education are going to help youth succeed in life. Alternative programs are no exception to this line of thought. My results force me to consider in what ways the cycles of oppression that Freire (2003) talks about are operating at AOP, which is, interestingly, an extremely well funded and strongly supported program compared to others in the LSB catchment area. The students receive a caring, human connection at AOP, alongside therapy, authoritarian and physical discipline regimes, as well as meritocratic and deficit model ideology. Learning to see themselves as resilient in the face of life's obstacles, AOP students accept the myth that anyone who tries hard will succeed; however, the system as it currently stands is not designed to allow this to happen to many people who are not already of the affluent classes. Aboriginal youth, homeless youth, recent immigrants, ethnic minorities, and ESL students face more challenges to finding academic success in BC schools than historically privileged groups. There are obviously many exceptions to this, and the former students I interviewed spoke with passion about how AOP not only changed their

life for the better, but also described the program as some of the best years of their life. But as a marginal space confining high percentages of marginalized youth in control and surveillance environment, AOP maintains the illusion of providing a quality education for all those who do not fit in mainstream schools.

## **PARADOX 2: MANAGEMENT LEVEL LANGUAGE AND LABELLING**

In this second paradox, I explore the managerial levels of the educational hierarchy in British Columbia, analyzing the words of ministry policy makers, school and school district administrators, as well as ministry policy itself, to better understand the ways that educational professionals and policy express contradictory ideas of who alternative students are and what is expected of them (please note that I do include some data from staff at AOP to support some of my arguments in this paradox). This paradox investigates how alternative students are framed by assumptions held by administrators, ministry-employees and policy itself, with a focus on the ways that deficit model language is both accepted and resisted by educational professionals. As with Paradox 1, I found several elements at play in these organizational circles of the bureaucracy. I first look at language use by the policy-makers in the MOE and the administrators at the LSB and NHS, followed by an analysis of self-fulfilling prophecies that the language of labels creates.

To remind ourselves, paradox is defined as a person, entity, situation or event that has a contradictory nature. Something is paradoxical because it both accepts and resists established or conventional norms. The heart of Paradox 2

lies in the contradictory understandings, and therefore assumptions, that different educational professionals hold about students, alternative schools, and education in general. Depending on the person and the context, these assumptions can accept and therefore support, resist and therefore reject, or simultaneously accept and resist established understandings of education. The simultaneous acceptance and rejection of educational convention appear to be the ways that alternative education professionals operate, speaking towards simultaneous support for and change of students with 'complex needs.' As with the previous paradox, Paradox 2 aims to dig underneath the surface of the language being used, and tries to push on the places where pathologization, deficit model thinking and labelling occur.

### **Language Use and Needy Students**

Data collected from individuals at the MOE and from the LSB suggest that alternative programs attempt to primarily focus on the *needs* of students, and that there are various avenues of support that the MOE and the LSB can provide to meet those needs. Lisa Bogan and Tracy Rasé, policy analysts at the MOE, Bill Schmidt, the district principal of alternative programs for the LSB, and Nathan Marietti, the principal of NHS, each emphasized the focus on student needs in alternative programs, to greater and lesser degrees of sensitivity and awareness towards the potential harm that deficit-oriented language and labels can bring. It was clear from this set of interviews that the needs of alternative students were seen to be different from the needs of mainstream students. Administrators and policy analysts viewed alternative students as *less* capable because of their

circumstances, but could become as capable as mainstream students, assuming the proper structural supports could be put in place. These professionals appeared to be not only very experienced, but also relatively humble and honest public servants, taking pride in the work they saw themselves doing for individuals and society through their various positions. Indeed, each appeared to be genuinely interested in helping students in alternate programs to succeed in meeting their life goals. The paradox here lies in this genuine interest and action towards the well-being of alternate students, contrasted with the negative language and labels used by these same professionals to describe youth in these programs.

Bill Schmidt, the district principal of alternative programs for the LSB, reiterated multiple times that alternative education students had more 'complex' needs than students in mainstream schools. The term 'complex needs' appears to be the newest buzzword in education to describe 'at-risk' youth. This term suggests gradations of needs for different groups of students, and implies that students in mainstream programs are 'simple' in terms of their needs by comparison to those in alternative programs. Bill stated: "I do not use the term 'tough kids'...I use the term 'complex youth.' I look at [alternative students] as complex in terms of their needs."

Beyond this discussion of semantics is an understanding that the word 'need' itself suggests a deficit, in that the student requires something to make them better, or more whole, and therefore working with the concept of 'needs' is working from within the deficit model. Of course all humans have needs: the

need to eat, to breath, to sleep, and the *need* for social connection and care, among others. But from within the realm of educational and academic terminology, where some students appear to have more ‘complex’ needs than others, this focus maintains deficit model thinking. Within the gradation of needs from simple to complex, there is an assumption every student has something ‘missing’ or has a hole that the teacher, administrator, and/or school system must fill.

A common practice also becomes apparent here: a change in school terminology without an associated shift in the way educational professionals frame and subsequently act towards these youth. As Newman (1996) writes:

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the educational label placed on the lower-working class students has changed from ‘culturally deprived’ to ‘culturally different’ to ‘disadvantaged’ to ‘at risk.’ Although educators have tried to make each label less condescending than the one before, whether the treatment the student receives in school has changed along with the label is a subject of intense debate. (p. 195)

Similarly, with the shift in the label from ‘at-risk’ to ‘complex needs,’ the treatment appears to be the same. I argue that the treatment of students remains relatively static because the deficit model perspective and pathologization of CLD youth is so pervasive in the society that it cannot be legitimately questioned. For example, Lisa Bogan, one of the MOE policy analysts working in the special education division told me that she sits on “...a cross-ministry committee...and I always ask, ‘What are we talking about when we talk about at-risk youth?’ People avoid me or talk in a particular way because they know that I will get on their case about this stuff.” Clearly within the MOE there is opposition to thinking critically



about the language being used, as exemplified by people ‘avoiding’ Lisa Bogan for her views. I suspect that this propagation of deficit model thinking within the institution allows pathologization of marginalized students to continue, helping to ensure the maintenance of an unjust social order. This is part of the paradox inherent to the working lives of these educational professionals.

Related to the discussion of language use is the idea of increasing the expectations and academic accountability associated with youth in alternate programs. In his interview, Bill Schmidt, the district principal for alternative programs in the LSB, explained that greater accountability through higher academic standards is what is expected from all alternative students in the LSB catchment area. Bill said:

... one of the things that I am constantly talking about when I meet with various programs is raising that bar, of our expectations of [alternate students]. Because I think often [alternate instructors feel], “Well, they’re just alternate kids. We really don’t expect that much from them.” I know at one program, we were looking at [students] getting a school leaving certificate. And I was “No no no no. These kids are capable of getting a regular dogwood.”

In a similar vein, Nathan Marietti, the NHS principal, stated:

My feeling is that we are underestimating...we’re underselling the student population that we have here [at NHS and AOP]. I think we can achieve more. And I think the kids are willing to do it...but the difference...the thing that differentiates [NHS] from all the other schools is that our kids want to [succeed], but they don’t know how. They don’t know how to study, they don’t know how to do homework. They don’t have a family structure set up where there is actually a designated place for them to do homework for an hour and a half every night. They don’t have these things in place. ...For me it’s an issue of being a moral imperative...we are not giving our kids the service they deserve. [AOP is] transforming kids, from kids who didn’t believe in themselves and could be on the streets right now to kids who feel confident about who they are and feel like they

can achieve anything they want. And that is great. Now, I want them to have all that, to continue to have all of that, plus a dogwood when they leave.

But even by recognizing that students may not have a place at home to study or by putting higher expectations and an even stronger emphasis on obtaining a dogwood diploma (I am sure there is already pressure to pursue this goal), these ideas appear to be somewhat paradoxical and misguided. The deeper roots of student problems are not being addressed through a piecemeal approach to 'also just getting them a dogwood' before they leave AOP, even if they 'feel like they can achieve anything.' Perhaps in the face of the larger social problems associated with students in these programs, administrators are doing whatever they can to help alternative students through whatever means are available. Ultimately, however, the effort appears to fall short (remember that the graduation rate of the former AOP student participants in this study is 25%, but perhaps this is a case in point of teacher expectations). Administrator actions and language use is paradoxical, in that there is a pushing/striving towards success for alternative students, but unless a shift towards understanding and uprooting the oppression of an unjust social order takes place alongside it, Bill Schmidt and Nathan Marietti are simply going to have the same percentage of marginalized students lined up to get into their marginal programs year after year. The problem is not only the educational institution, but also the society that has been 'schooled' to believe that education is only place where youth can and should learn things (Illich, 1970).

I feel the need to digress briefly into some considerations of resolutions to the paradox, even at this preliminary stage in Paradox 2. I believe that even with the best available practices and programs, the educational institution will resist major reform, although strenuous political activism from a wide spectrum of individuals and groups across the society may force the system to consider other options. One response to this paradox is increasing the volume and frequency of critiques of the system, and a calling for the revitalization of multiple kinds of learning outlets to meet the diverse needs of the people in the community. Ivan Illich (1970) suggests that in the face of a traumatic education institution that 'schools' students (and the society) into believing that the process of education is in fact the human value of learning, the only option is to 'de-school' or de-institutionalize our minds and the society. Illich's theory is that by institutionalizing values, students (and parents, administrators, teachers, etc.) learn to believe that the education system is the only way for people to learn what they need. This last statement is true, in that diplomas and other certificates can be used as currency in the society, even though a person holding a diploma or a degree may, in fact, be completely incompetent. Illich gives some excellent food for thought in considering how to address these paradoxes.

Returning to the main argument, I was talking previously about the assumptions of administrators at NHS and the LSB and how their thinking about youth maintains the current system. In contrast, Lisa Bogan at the MOE holds a different set of assumptions about alternative students from Bill Schmidt and Nathan Marietti. Lisa was careful in her interview to explain how she worked to

change deficit-model language at the ministry because she felt it was detrimental to both those who were required to enact educational policy, as well as those students who were being acted upon by those policies. She had much to say concerning youth labels and the way that particular kinds of students are ascribed to particular categories in the ministry and in our minds. Lisa said:

...[I believe] no child is learning disabled, or at-risk, although it is in the public unconscious to locate these things within these children. I believe that these are kids with behavioral challenges that are described within a particular [MOE] funding category. I argued with [external researchers funded by the MOE] about this a lot. They used a lot of the at-risk/high-risk language, but I believe that as soon as you attach that label to a kid, that child is seen very differently, very negatively. I mean, what does high risk mean? Does it mean you live in a certain area, or that your family is poor, or does that mean you are in a gang...? It is hard to write [policy] paragraphs about this language stuff. If I have a mission, it is to undo labels. We do not call students who have special needs...we don't call them special needs students. They are students with a particular kind of need.

We can see here an emphasis on needs, and therefore an enactment of deficit model thinking, however something in Lisa's language is different. Lisa speaks about labelling and the stigma that comes with educational labels, revealing an awareness I did not find in many others. In my interview with her it was clear that she had thought long about these issues, and the position she took within the MOE in terms of how these youth are defined included the potentiality of injuring people through language use. Her stance shifts the focus from how alternative students embody particular mental, emotional or behavioural deficits, towards a focus on how youth are framed in MOE policy and school practice in terms of how it impacts those youth. Lisa continued:

How we define those young people, and the way we throw language around, it can be harmful. For example we don't *target* populations...we *focus* on populations, we don't *target* them. This stuff, the language, it moves slowly...but if we can get words...like 'twitter' into the dictionary, what about 'risk?' 'Labelling?'

Although I asked Tracy Rasé, also a policy analyst in the special education division at the MOE about labels and harm to students, she said it was outside of her area of expertise, and directed my questions to Lisa. Lisa, although using the term 'needs,' was looking beyond it to a certain degree, resisting it from within the institution. Bill, as we have seen, was consciously accepting of a needs-based (and therefore a deficit) approach, and did not seem to resist it or the underlying assumptions lying therein. Bill was, interestingly, also very calculating with his language use, revealing this through the omission of all risk terminology in his interview, a tactic I used in my Master's thesis. From the perspective of this second paradox, we see how entrenched the deficit model is in education, and that changes in terminology do not necessarily lead to changes in action, attitude, or consciousness. With a focus on youth needs and service to youth, Bill Schmidt and others, at least in part, help maintain the institution as it stands, re-creating the deficit model while talking about raising expectations and outcomes for students with 'complex needs.' It was obvious during data collection that all of the professionals I spoke to certainly had the best interest of students in mind, and from a certain perspective each was providing resources to youth. Simultaneously, however, sensitivity to the use of and resistance to specific labels was not uniform, and tacit acceptance of common educational practices

appeared to be the norm, even if newer terminology such as ‘youth with complex needs’ was in use.

The problem I see in all of this is the fact that no one, other than Lisa, seemed to have thought about how the institution itself was creating problems on a massive scale for these young people. It is clear to me that the education system *does* monopolize 99% of the ‘learning’ resources (i.e., creative, economic, imaginative, cultural) of the society that could otherwise be redistributed in a way that was more equal (Illich, 1970). But that assumes that there are not ‘oppressors’ who benefit greatly from maintaining a consumer culture that is readily schooled into believing that public education is the great equalizer for all. Thinking about what it would look like to ‘deschool’ the society, however, as Illich (1970) suggests we must do, appears to be an almost impossible task. In the face of these issues, however, part of me wishes I could in some way help to call for a massive shift in our collective thought process. This does not resolve the paradox thus far, but does give interesting food for thought that will be picked up again in Chapter 5.

### **Self-Fulfilling Prophecies of Labels**

Another aspect of Paradox 2 is the way in which negative labels can actually re-create the very problems they are trying to address. There is the possibility of generating a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure for individuals who are told in multiple ways that they are undisciplined, academically incapable, behaviourally unstable, and/or emotionally disturbed or underdeveloped. MOE funding categories cover a range of different issues that students may face; for

example, Category B is Deaf/Blind, Category G is Autism Spectrum Disorder and Category H is Intensive Behavioural Intervention/Serious Mental Illness (BC Ministry of Education, 2011). Although the label associated with the Category H MOE funding category of 'intensive behavioural intervention/serious mental illness' will provide extra funding to the school district within which the so-labelled student is enrolled, the label itself, as a description of the young person, in a sense yokes the label and the student together into one entity for the purposes of that child's education in BC. Even if a student exhibits some or many difficult behaviours, there is a danger that outside of a program that strives to accept the student holistically and recognize strengths as well as weaknesses, the student will end up describing himself or herself as undisciplined, incapable, unstable, underdeveloped, and/or disturbed. The label, even if it can only be seen by administrators, counsellors and teachers in the student's file, will be carried through the different treatment of that student in their life at school.

To use McDermott's (1996) language, if a label exists and is given operational power in the life of the educational institution, then youth can and will be acquired by those labels. If a student is captured by a particular label (i.e., LD, ADHD, problem behaviour, Category H), over time that label may become a part of who that person is, at least in terms of how they are treated by influential others (Dallos et al., 1997), and likely in relation to how they see themselves in relation to their own life possibilities (Sohbat, 2003; Waterhouse, 2007). The labels themselves may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies, social stigma and inappropriate educational attention and interventions for specific populations,

diverting attention away from institutional sources of youth problems (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). If a student is often or always placed in 'alternative,' 'remedial,' or 'special' classes for some or all subjects, that student is being given a strong lesson by the institution about who they are, what is expected of them, and what kind of potential they have to succeed in school and beyond. With overarching societal beliefs about the connection between school success and life success (Evans, 1995), and with research connecting self-destructive youth behaviour and negative impacts on life after school (Tanner, Davies & O'Grady, 1999), school failure and reductions in post high school options are tied. In other words, the actions of these labels on students within the institution of education generate self-fulfilling prophecies that can compound the damage being done to CLD youth in alternative programs (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Prosser, 2006; Rist, 2000).

On the other hand, there are numerous stories of youth overcoming the odds to be a success, and there is a myth in North American culture of people reacting against authority figures (i.e., parent, teacher, coach) who told that person they are not capable, they can't do it, or will not succeed. Similar to the myth of the North American Dream, this 'under-dog' or 'rags to riches' myth suggests that precisely because a person feels marginalized and/or has been told that they will never amount to anything, for example, they use their force of will to turn themselves into a success through hard-work and determination (famous examples include Jim Carrey, Oprah Winfrey, and Celine Dion each of whom lived in impoverished conditions during childhood). Indeed, there are



clearly many ‘at-risk’ or marginalized youth who fight against the ‘odds,’ and become successful in school and in life outside of school. In response, I would say that the ‘odds’ are still stacked against those who have been marginalized, and the few examples that prove the myth true are actually extremely rare. A recent Statistics Canada study shows that Canadians who have not graduated are twice as likely than those who have graduated to be unemployed (Gilmore, 2010), and alternative students do not appear to have a very high graduation rate. I was unable to locate a precise graduation rate for the alternative education population in reports from the MOE or the LSB, and no administrative or policy participant who I interviewed was able to provide me with a documented percentage. Tracy Rasé at the MOE gave an educated guess that it was about 20%. In other words, those alternative students who are ‘successful,’ at least from the perspective of obtaining a high school diploma, are a clear exception and not the rule.

In their interviews, 11 out of 20 former AOP students stated that they had difficulty learning, and four out of these 11 stated that they had been diagnosed as LD. Of the nine students who said they did *not* have difficulty learning, five received their dogwood diploma. What these numbers show is that more than half of the participants in my sample felt they had a problem with their capacity to learn, and none of these individuals graduated from high school. The reactions from the staff to ideas of labelling showed a deeper understanding, or at least a measured response, to educational labels. Tom Carrick explained in his interview:

I think [the staff] all see students...that they are dynamic human beings. That their behavior is not who they are. You asked earlier about labelling...does AOP label people. So, a student comes [into the program], we know they have their behaviour problems, we know they have their [learning disabilities], and we take all of those things into consideration. But we don't say 'That is the kid.' Who are these kids outside of their label? Are they *a/ways* angry? Are they *a/ways* not able to focus?

Vince Tilder, the Grade 10 teacher, took a different tack in the staff focus group:

“...our students definitely play up that they are ADHD, or whatever label they might have.” He explained that students use the label as a crutch, to provide an excuse for their inability or disinterest to do their work, or to justify poor behaviour. We see here how even if staff reject negative school labels, students will absorb the associated implied deficits as part of their identity and potentially enact a self-fulfilling prophecy. Between these comments from Vince and Tom, the staff appear to view the youth as more than the labels that are adhered to the students. Erick Koote, the Grade 11/12 therapist, talking about what he does with a new student’s academic file when it arrives on his desk from the LSB, takes it even further:

Sometimes I'll get a really thick file with assessments and everything, records. And I won't read it until the end of the year. Rarely have I read a student's file. Everything I need to know is right there in front of me when [the new student] sit[s] down. And they'll tell me what I need to know. I read their file later, if ever. And would any of that have changed anything in me or them? No. I'm not going to waste my time reading a whole bunch of assessments.

In a sense, Erick is trying not to be swayed by a student’s label(s) before he meets them in person, apparently resisting the practices of the system. These examples suggest the staff approach to students is more holistic than what

occurs in mainstream classrooms (also see Waterhouse, 2007), and also more understanding of who the entire student is as opposed to just focusing on and reacting to the label that is attached to the student. Indeed, Erick doesn't read the files of his students, apparently because it will not help him understand or work with the student. Another possibility is that Erick does not want to have pre-conceived notions of who that person is, at least as reflected in the formal academic records that may or may not take the full context into account.

Not all students at AOP carry a ministry funding category label that brings money to the LSB from the MOE, but all AOP students are obviously attending an alternative school, a part of the alternate education system of the LSB, which my findings suggest is perceived by both students and staff as a social stigma. Jackie Angler, the youth and family worker for the Grade 11/12 classroom at AOP talked about this stigma of attending an alternative program. Notes from the staff focus group state: "Jackie mentioned that being in an alternative school is definitely seen to be a bad thing, and she related how one female student told her friends that she was going to Hawaii for 10 days on vacation, when really she was going on the AOP 10 day [out] trip." It is possible that this particular student was attempting to impress her friends about going to Hawaii, or was more concerned/embarrassed about sharing the news of her out-trip than sharing news of her alternative program, but I trust Jackie's analysis that the student did not wish to carry the stigma of an alternate program into her peer circle. This idea suggests that regardless of whether a label comes down from the MOE to help cover the costs of educating a particular student or not, the existence of

alternative schools, as they are presently manifested, label students enrolled in a program. Alternative schools propagate the deficit model thinking in the minds of students and staff, and everyone in the school system has an idea, and a negative one, of the kind of student that attends an alternate school.

Although labels themselves provide material support for alternative students through the ministry, allowing officials at the LSB to allocate teachers, youth and family workers, facilities, and other resources, my data shows that self-fulfilling prophecies and consequences of these negative labels are real. This aspect of Paradox 2 shows how deeply entrenched in the school system deficit model thinking is, and how labelling is a part of the institution that will not be going away any time soon. Until the underlying beliefs about youth who are 'at-risk' of failing are recognized and remediated by professionals, and indeed, the society at large, students in these marginal educational spaces will continue to be pathologized in the meritocratic education system in British Columbia.

### **Paradox 2 Summary**

This paradox provides some insight into the ways that administrators at the LSB and NHS, as well as policy makers from the MOE use language that either resists, accepts, or simultaneously resists and accepts labels and deficit model thinking for youth in BC alternate programs. By exploring the ways that these educational professionals position themselves and educational practice in relation to the students who populate their programs, an understanding of how institutional components of schooling marginalize and pathologize students. In

terms of resolutions for this paradox, I will capture these thoughts in the summary of Chapter 4 immediately below.

## **CHAPTER FOUR SUMMARY**

On the surface, the teacher-student relationship at AOP and the language of NHS, LSB and MOE administrators/managers fit into established mainstream understandings of how education can and should be done in the North American context. But if we view these actions through the lens of particular theoretical frames, namely the processes of pathologization, deficit model thinking, and school labelling for marginalized youth, we begin to see the paradoxes inherent in our education system. Students, staff, administrators and policy makers co-create the unjust ideas that frame young students who will become enrolled in alternative education programs in the province. From one perspective, the results in this chapter show how the contradictory relationships between these various actors, stemming in part from historical realities of colonization, oppression and deficit-model thinking, manifest themselves currently in modern alternative education settings. From another perspective, however, there is more going on here. In other words, As I mentioned previously, the discovery of these paradoxes require researchers to slow down, and more thoughtfully analyze what is going on. As the contradictions in these relationships reveal dissonance, discord, and friction in this form of education, we are forced to question our assumptions, that alternative schools are good for the school system, that they are good for students, and ultimately good for the society.

My results hint at a less rosy reality of alternative schools, where alternate programs appear to graduate a relatively low percentage of students, provide remedial academics, absorb and divert energy and financial resources from other learning options for marginalized youth, and finally ensure the perpetual construction of a 'failing' underclass of young people who will serve those above them in the social hierarchy of the society. This theory stands in contrast, paradoxically, with the 'promise' shining from the common assumptions about the good that alternate schools do for youth. I am not implying that there is an intentional and hidden agenda of particular people working to ensure that alternative schools help to create an underclass of people. However, scholars suggest that the assumptions that maintain the processes and actions of alternative education are products of the ideology that sustain the current competitive, capitalistic economic system as well as the associated social agendas operating in our society (Dei, Mazzuca, McIssac, & Zine, 1997). In this way, the society at large is implicated in the processes being described here.

It is important to consider at this stage what, exactly, might be done to address or resolve the paradoxes being presented. What is the pathway leading towards a synthesis of the contradictions, towards a truer form of egalitarianism, towards real social justice for marginalized groups? What do these results point towards in terms of implications for alternative schooling specifically, and the educational institution operating in North America in general? I think Ivan Illich as well as Paulo Freire, whose ideas I delve into in the next chapter, provide some exciting avenues for critique and reform, although I admit I am not certain about

the feasibility of adopting their radical and anarchistic (for Illich anyway) approaches for undoing education in this politically and economically turbulent moment in history.

## **CHAPTER 5 – IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

This chapter includes reflections on the implications of the results of the research, considerations on limitations, recommendations for future research, and my concluding thoughts about the entire dissertation.

### **REFLECTIONS ON IMPLICATIONS**

The research findings reveal that there are complex paradoxical relationships being enacted within alternative education settings, carrying important implications not only for the students and staff in alternate programs, but also for educational administrators and policy makers who organize and manage the bureaucracy. These implications are far-reaching, ultimately stretching to the overarching education institutions at play in the province and across North America. Each section below looks at a different set of implications for the results presented in Chapter 4.

#### **Institutional Implications**

My findings point towards the way that power is tied to the relationships that exist within social institutions (in this case, the institution of education), and how educational professionals, as functionaries of this system, work to accept, and sometimes resist, their positions of power in relation to youth in alternative education. Ivan Illich describes some aspects of these power relationships in *Deschooling Society* (1970). Illich's thesis revolves around the *institutionalization*



of social needs, where human values such as health and wellness, security and safety, rewarding labour/employment, and access to meaningful learning over the lifespan become adopted as responsibilities of the state. Illich suggests that this process, whereby human values become institutionalized, 'schools' people into confusing process and substance. He writes: "Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work" (1970, p. 1). Further, Illich posits that schools monopolize the ways people think about learning, 'schooling' society into believing that if anyone wants or needs to learn something, a school is the best and only place to do it. Illich states that schools mainly work to confuse people, replacing *value* with *process* in the minds of students and members of society whose government manages the process.

Illich (1977) also critiques the way that professionals have changed from serving people to serving their institutions and professional association. He writes:

From merchant-craftsman or learned advisor the professional has mutated into a crusading philanthropist. He knows how infants are to be fed, which student ought to go on for higher education, what drugs people ought not to ingest. From a tutor who watched over you while you memorized your lesson, the schoolmaster has mutated into an educator whose moralizing crusade entitles him to push himself between you and anything you want to learn. Before he can help you, he first pins you down in a bed or on a school bench. (1977, p. 361)

This quote not only suggests the problems of having powerful professional classes of people, but also touches on that idea of monopolization of learning

broached just above. In education, professionals serving within the institution will assume the power to prescribe particular treatments for those determined to be in need of their care. This is problematic, as we have seen in Chapter 2, in that the “description-explanation-prediction-prescription” (Valencia, 1997, p. 7) process is assumed to be an excellent way to help students ‘at-risk’ of failure. Professionals charged with locating and remediating student deficiencies, however, may fail to see how their actions do more harm than good. Illich writes:

The public acceptance of dominant professions is an eminently political event. Each new establishment expands government by expert proxy and encroaches on lawmaking, judgment and public administration. Power passes from the layman's elected peers into the hands of a self-accrediting elite. Only certified holders of academic knowledge-stock are admitted into this elite. (1977, p. 362)

Illich’s ideas are radical and anarchistic, suggesting that people should take control of their own bodies and minds over which professionals and professional organizations (i.e., the British Columbia Teachers Federation, British Columbia College of Teachers) have assumed responsibility (1977). I think radical ideas and action are necessary to undo the entrenched deficit model thinking and pathologization we can see in the paradoxes of power and promise outlined in Chapter 4.

Illich’s theories suggest that compulsory public education in North America has become a massive social institution that is now too large and self-serving. The growth of the institution itself beyond a reasonable limit means that it has inevitably become ‘counterproductive,’ or working against it’s own stated objectives. This paradox of institutions working contrary to their assumed and

overtly stated missions appears to be one of Illich's major critiques that he locates in many social institutions (Finger & Asún, 2001), such as medicine, transportation, and the legal/justice system, to name a few. An example of counterproductivity in education might be that competitive marks are given out to all students, which impact their ability to advance academically. If the goal of education is learning, and yet large percentages of students are dropping/failing out (i.e., not learning what educators and administrators want them to learn because they are no longer attending school), then education is being counterproductive; it is running contrary to its stated goal. If so many students are not graduating, is that the fault of the students' as is currently assumed, or is it the schools'/institutions' fault? Although some students have more control than others in terms of how well they do in school, some students' failures are outside their control because of how schools are designed and run.

The social institutions that make up our society, such as education, health care, transportation, and legal justice, which have presumably been designed and created with the intention to help people, can be seen from Illich's perspective as doing the opposite. Individual members of the society lose control of their capacity to know themselves and each other, because each is working, moving, and learning to someone else's (i.e., a professional doctor, lawyer, teacher, professor) idea of what is good or important or worthwhile. Through this process, people lose their ability, and likely their motivation, to do these things in a different, creative way. What does it look like to live close enough to work to walk home? What does it look like to make your own clothes and grow/make

your own food? How do people take control over their own lives in the face of professional classes of people, and the institutions which support and are supported by them? Illich suggests that the harm being done to individuals and society is massive, but also that our human potential is massive, if currently stunted by professionalism and institutionalism.

To address the current system that re-creates successive generations of alternative students, Illich (1970) provides some examples of how access to learning whatever anyone wanted to learn is possible for all, including how it can be done in way that does away with the injustices of current educational structures. Illich suggests implementing four education 'networks,' which would "...enable the student to gain access to any educational resource which may help [them] to define and achieve [their] own goals" (1970, p. 78). Paraphrasing from Illich, these four networks include access to educational resources and tools, access to both peers and masters with whom to do skill exchanges, peer matching by which any two (or more) people can find one another for the purpose of learning and exploring similar fields/ideas together, and access to educators-at-large who collectively could provide expert instruction across a great number of topics/areas. Illich's approach is based on the assumption that human beings learn best when choosing both what and how they want to learn any particular thing. He recommends removing all forms of marking/grades, certifications, and diplomas, replacing them if need be with competency exams for a role or function as a requirement of employment. What should it matter how or where one learned a particular set of skills, aptitudes, theories, or ideas? What

should be most important is that the person is competent to do the particular job or role being offered, regardless of whether they went to Harvard or the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT). This approach addresses the labelling issue head on by discarding the prestige attached to any specific institution of learning, as well as by doing away with the protocols that require school systems to relegate some students to the margins. Illich's 'learning centres' can be much less formal places than the way most schools currently operate, allowing people to learn what and how they want. I see true these learning spaces being more like community centres that provide access to a host of different kinds of resources, potentially inspired by centres conceived by George Leonard in *Education and Ecstasy* (1968). These notions are Illich's solutions for a deschooled society, and certainly would provide a more level playing field for all people in the society.

Illich's ideas radicalize my thinking, and help me see the wider scope of the problem being faced in this dissertation. Illich gives me more confidence to say that we need to get rid of marks and other arbitrary evaluation systems that only serve to sort students by 'ability.' Implementing the ideas inspired by Illich is certainly a difficult task, because the ideas exist in a society that is actively working to be egalitarian and distribute power and resources to *all* of its members. Our society, although it often pays lip service to these ideals, is based on colonialism, competitive capitalistic economic models, and increasing privatization. I do believe we need to deschool society, and I think routes to it exist, but none of those routes appear to be realistic at the present time. In the

Alternate Program and Foundation Implications section below, I discuss some options for how non-profit educational foundations that serve alternative programs can radicalize and politicize themselves, organizing grass-roots activism to truly serve all students in the province.

### **Professional Implications**

At one level, programmatic elements developed by the AOP staff (i.e., counselling, caring/familial atmosphere, out trips) support students in tangible ways as noted by the data. Further, MOE and LSB budgetary and academic policy provides allocations for every youth identified as requiring specific additional resources. Regardless of how effective these supports and resources are at serving the needs of alternative students, undoing the deeper social problems that help to create these youth to begin with requires a radical change in thinking, attitude, and practice for professionals working with these youth.

Actual changes to the system begins with internal work on the part of educators and administrators, meaning these people need to develop a critical self-awareness concerning their personal assumptions and associated language around alternative students, at least in terms of deficits, needs, and the promise young people hold. As Lisa Bogan, one of the policy analysts from the MOE, suggested in her interview, educators, policy makers, and members of the society in general need to work to personally interrogate and critique their understandings of language related to youth and education, and think hard about their responsibility for the ways youth are framed in school and by the society.

Observations of the AOP staff reveal they imposed many far-reaching responsibilities on themselves, such as taking personal time to be with students, picking up students to bring them to school, and calling students regularly to keep communication lines open. By cultivating interest in and engagement with not only their students, but also the family and friends of their students, staff strive to recruit others to their cause of helping students make positive change. For this to work, however, professionals associated with alternative education need to know the students and student communities who are impacted by their work on a level deeper than I suspect many are willing or prepared for. For example, in my conversations with Bill Schmidt, the district principal for alternative programs at the LSB, it became clear that he had worked in mainstream and alternative settings for many years, and he had interacted directly with youth regularly in the course of his duties over those years. His compassion and understanding for youth and the complexity of their situations is apparent, but his language is accepting of the status quo. I think we see here a catch-22, where Bill, and others, have worked for years in the institution of education in BC and has acquired a certain appreciation for and comfort with the way the system is. His job depends, as do thousands of others, on facilitating a smooth operation of the system. But the changes needed to undo the replication of 'youth with complex needs,' no matter the label, are radical and political. I wonder how much time, energy and will are available to think and do things differently for both high- and low- level professionals operating within the institution of education. These professionals might begin by taking a more active

role in the communities in which alternative students come from, and pushing back against a culture that accepts competitive meritocracy, deficit model thinking, and pathologization. This will mean sacrifice, commitment, and risk in terms of reactions and reprisals from the institution in response to effective resistance. Undoing social inequality may start with seeing and knowing the realities of alternative students' lives.

If my results are valid, then educational professionals are relatively unconscious of the bind they are caught in, between keeping their jobs/salaries by facilitating the system, and taking a risk of undoing the processes that marginalize CLD students. The sorting function of education and the people operating as educational professionals work to place certain kinds of youth within second-tier, alternate classrooms, where students' anti-social attitudes and lack of motivation are replaced with coping mechanisms with which to 'appropriately' deal with their stress and failure. Knowing this, how can professionals respond? Or beyond education, how can each of us as members of the society change in a way that will allow us to hear a call to arms, to demand a re-humanization of the ways that people learn? If Illich (1970) is right, and those of us who have proceeded through the education system have been 'schooled' into believing that the process of our 12, or 15, or 20 years in school means we have learned something important or useful, then we are in need of deschooling. We are not skilled, necessarily, at questioning how learning currently happens. Getting to a place where critique and reform are possible means deschooling ourselves, to a



certain extent. It also means adopting a more anarchistic persona, taking responsibility for own learning again and encouraging others to do the same.

### **Student Implications**

Even with a programmatic emphasis on team-work and group process at AOP, the narrow and un-problematized emphasis on the capacity of individual students to overcome social inequities and become upwardly mobile (McGinnis, 2009) helps to maintain the dominant, unjust, and oppressive social order. From one perspective, community/society members could respond that this is just the way the world 'is,' and AOP and other alternative programs are doing good work by helping students prepare for that world by focusing on individual success no matter the obstacles. It could be argued further that the development of community, care, trust, and mutual support may even be detrimental to marginalized youth, and would only set them up for failure in the 'real' (i.e., competitive, capitalistic, dog-eat-dog) world. Understanding these possible arguments, front-line workers in alternative programs would do well to not only be self-critical in terms of their understanding of deficit model thinking and pathologization, but to offer their students paradigms or languages of resistance to work against the oppressive and dysfunctional aspects of education and the larger socio-economic and cultural ideologies that operate in schools. This kind of politicized, activist reaction by teachers of marginalized youth is encouraged by Lisa Delpit in her 2006 book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. Delpit uses the term, "the culture of power" to refer to the ways that power is imbued within the relationships that exist in social institutions of a

culture. Delpit describes how issues of power are enacted within classrooms, that there are 'codes' or rules that must be followed to participate in power, and how the codes are designed to best serve those who already wield power in the culture (pp. 24-25). This is similar to the social reproduction model of education (De Jesus, 2005; Valencia, 2010), which suggests that schools must generate the attitudes and dispositions necessary to re-create social power imbalances between dominant and subordinate groups; these actions, which are ideologically based, allow those who wield power in the society to maintain their positions.

It is important to consider in what ways youth in alternative programs might gain awareness and put words to the power relationships occurring in school and society. Towards this end, Delpit (2006) suggests that marginalized youth should be

...*taught* the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors;...they must be allowed the resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own "expertness" as well... (p. 45, original emphasis).

In this way we can see how teaching alternative students about a "culture of power" may give access to some of tools by which power is enacted and operates in the social spaces these students find themselves forced to operate within. This critical awareness and access to tools granted by teachers may help to show how arbitrary the codes or rules are, and how those without power can work to dismantle oppressive social systems. Those *with* power are usually the ones who are least aware of the power relationships they and others are

enacting, and assume their high status position is the 'neutral' status quo attainable by all (Delpit, 2006).

Teaching students to critically analyze themselves and their situations will help them to see how the meritocracy operates through schools. These students might learn, for example, how in competitive meritocracies, in order for there to be a group of 'haves,' there must be a group of 'have nots.' Students who drop or are pushed out of school may not be stupid, lazy, or learning disabled, but rather may not have access to the resources others have; because marks are competitive, any disadvantage to one student is an advantage to another. This is true for both school and the economics of the society. Alternative students might learn that they are in the 'have not' category, as suggested by their various unflattering labels, but their intelligent understanding and resistance might provide visibility and political clout in the community and the society.

### **Alternate Program and Foundation Implications**

My results show that AOP, and other alternative programs in the province, provide a marginal space for youth who are perceived to not 'fit' into mainstream classrooms for a variety of reasons. The support given to students in alternate education is tangible, but, as was shown in Chapter 4, it comes at a cost of continued processes of stigmatization and pathologization; deficit model thinking shifts attention away from unjust inequalities in the society and focuses instead on the limitations of individual students. Vadeboncoeur (2009) writes:

[Alternative education programs] are spaces that provide evidence of the failure of the school system, laying the blame for failure at the

feet of individual youth. They highlight the inequities built into the structure of education, the inequities that necessitate alternative programs to begin with, although they are also places where difference is respected, rather than silenced; enabled, rather than oppressed. (p. 295)

Although my findings agree with most of what Vadeboncoeur suggests here, I would have to disagree with the last half of the last sentence in this quote. I think alternate schools *can* be places that respect difference, and might enable some CLD students in some ways, but my results imply that oppression through pathologization and deficit model thinking is ongoing in alternative programs.

In a similar way to alternate schools, educational foundations that exist to support marginalized youth, by placing emphasis on supporting individual 'at-risk' students, likewise shifts attention away from structural and institutional components that replicate 'risk' in each successive generation of students. The implication then, is considering how these programs and foundations might need to change in order to address the deeper class reproduction happening in schools.

Currently, educational entities exist and operate in conjunction with the LSB and the MOE to raise money for and serve 'at-risk' youth. The ways that these educational foundations operate can be seen as maintaining a system of what Freire (2003) calls *false charity*. False charity is described as an act that appears to help people who exist in an oppressed position in a society, but that action really only maintains the social order so that an impoverished underclass is maintained permanently. For example, in the urban area where AOP is located, homeless shelters and 'single room occupancy' hotels for people without

the means to establish themselves with more permanent shelter gives a certain level of support to individuals. However, because the resource and policy focus is on immediate deficiencies (i.e., emergency shelter), policies and programs that provide long term, healthy and self-sustained living spaces are underfunded (Irwin, 2004). Providing working tools to 'oppressed' people for establishing themselves as full human beings in the society is not on the agenda. In a similar way, educational foundations provide resources to students 'in need,' but I show that this support maintains the unequal status quo.

The AOP Foundation and board of directors (BOD) is focused on helping the students in the program, covering the costs of a wide variety of student supports, including: free food that is available daily, vehicles and other logistics required for transport and maintaining students and staff on all outdoor trips, salaries of the therapists at the program, and other material items in support of the program's goals. Likewise, the Move Foundation, another organization that focuses on youth in alternative programs in the LSB catchment area, provides tuition and other educational support to individual students who are motivated and capable of working towards a post-secondary degree; however, these funds are only provided if the student has overcome personal challenges before or during high school. These foundations are helping individual students in specific contexts, and their goal is to improve lives through increasing the availability and amounts of support they provide to students who are generally enrolled in alternative education programs (AOP Foundation, 2011; Move Foundation, 2011).

On the surface, these appear to be benevolent organizations, and at a superficial/individual level they are helping some students in various ways. These benefits to individual students are not in doubt, however, there is another side to the existence of these institutions that must be addressed to better understand where 'at-risk' youth come from, or how 'at-risk' youth are framed. Freire (2003) describes the concept of false charity as an act that outwardly attempts to support oppressed or marginalized people, but fails to genuinely do so because the action taken does not change the unjust structures that propagate oppression. Freire states:

Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their 'generosity,' the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity,' which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. (p. 44)

This description, laid over the actions of the AOP and Move Foundations, reveals how the individuals within these organizations, their funders and supporters, all inevitably help to perpetuate the unequal status quo. Along with the benefits of their actions to students and probably a boost to the egos of donors and board members, comes a generally unforeseen consequence: namely, that the energy that is sustaining the foundations' work also shifts attention and work away from deeper, more structural issues that might be able to at least recognize, and potentially address, the unjust social order. While the money raised does help specific individuals, and may at one time come to help all individuals within the

mandates of these organizations, the unequal access to educational rewards, academic bias against individuals from CLD backgrounds, and denial of self-empowerment through the granting of support from sources external to the individual, their family and community, are what continues to happen in the meantime. If the AOP Foundation decides to expand its operations and work to fund all students in all alternative programs in the LSB catchment area, what does this mean from a Freirian (2003) sense of the 'rejects of life' needing to "extend their trembling hands" (p. 45) to receive educational resources from wealthy individuals/institutions? The action of these organizations appear to be false charity, in that the resources are not being generated, even in part, by the student, their family or community. Their work does not go very far in terms of uprooting or changing the existing social order: there will be new bodies to populate AOP and other alternative programs, creating a perpetual crop of youth who can fill the spaces vacated by the previous cadre of students. The cultural assumptions of poverty and the need for outside assistance, as enacted through these foundations, ensure that the environments that re-create 'complex needs' in these youth will continue. In this way we see the 'permanent fount' that will create the appearance of necessity for these philanthropic organizations in perpetuity.

Similar arguments could be levelled more generally at the alternate school system in the province. Alternative education accepts many young people into its confines, and the results show how educational professionals feel they are doing their best to serve students within that system. However, with money and

resources flowing into official alternative programs in the province, which require giving institutional life to negative school labels and MOE funding categories to ensure that these entities are appropriately funded, students and society may not be getting what they think they are getting. Again, assumptions about the good these programs provide appear to be exaggerated in light of this line of argumentation.

Educators in alternative programs seeking financial assistance or governance from foundations for their operations should be aware of these contradictions, and be ready to either establish organizations that avoid these problems or at least push back against them. For example, the AOP Foundation is an organization that raises money for the program, providing salaries to the counsellors and support for many other aspects of AOP. The position and activities of the BOD is such that support goes directly to the program to help youth, which is a good start, but if redress of the re-creation of pathologized and labelled youth is a goal, then the AOP BOD must become a political organization. Lobbying and working alongside politicians, the provincial legislature, the administrators/employees of the LSB and the MOE must become another aspect of these organizations. Deeper understandings of how the processes of deficit model thinking and pathologization of youth play out in schools is important for people sitting on the BOD, and other foundations, to have.

If we push this idea even further, we might begin to contemplate an even more radical idea, where the AOP Foundation, Move Foundation, and others become political and activist organizations that attempt to raise critical



awareness of how youth come to be pathologized and marginalized through the education system. Educational foundations such as these need to stop focusing on helping individual youth, and they need to advocate for and embody a social movement. If these organizations are truly interested in the well being of 'alternative' students who are 'at-risk' of school and life failure, then lobbying the government might be a good start; organizing and mobilizing parents, teachers, and administrators to rally to their cause would become a an even more important step, however. Groups that are interested in seeing more than just superficial change need to adopt a much more radical agenda, rather than raising money for one program that helps 40 youth a year stay in school (most of whom will not graduate). This action feeds the egos of the donors and fundraisers alike, helping them feel good about giving something back to those 'less fortunate' than themselves.

Holding this all in mind, consider the individuals who make up the AOP BOD. These people mostly come from the corporate elite of society; indeed, more than half of the AOP BOD is either an executive for an investment firm, bank, or other large corporate institution. From an analysis of the individual board members on the AOP BOD website, 66% of board members currently work as executive-class corporate business people, and an additional 13% used to work as business executives but now work for schools of business (AOP Foundation, 2011). The people who make up these kinds of boards often are recruited to do so because their corporate and casual contacts include individuals who come from the upper class of society, thereby helping the BOD to raise money from

affluent individuals for distribution to those who 'need' it most. This is not necessarily a problem, but as Freire (2003) suggests, it is difficult for people of the oppressor class to give true charity to the oppressed, without it becoming false charity. For those oppressors who do move to help the oppressed, Freire suggests that the road to authentic charity is not simple, and certainly is not undertaken without great sacrifice. Freire states:

It happens, however, that as [members of the oppressor class] cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know. Accordingly, these adherents to the people's cause constantly run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as malefic as that of the oppressors. The generosity of the oppressors is nourished by an unjust order, which must be maintained in order to justify that generosity. (p. 60)

It is this unjust order, not only left intact but supported by the practices of these foundations, that is of primary concern for this argument. All of this is paradoxical because there is a massive contradiction between the stated goals and activities of these foundations, and the wider ramifications of their actions. Again, if serving 'at-risk' youth is really what they want, then they need to be undermining the unjust social order, and successful actions towards that end would cut into the bottom line of the corporate elite.

I do not think the board of directors of either the AOP or Move Foundations would see themselves as oppressors, even if they were to read my analysis, my interpretations of Freire, and reflect on the actions of their organizations. These entities and the individuals who operate them would not

place themselves in the 'oppressor' role in relation to the youth these foundations are mandated to serve. If the AOP BOD was to read my theoretical analysis, I hypothesize that their response would be to argue another perspective of what was occurring. They likely would say that the actions of their organizations are giving unique and substantial support to whole cohorts of 'at-risk' students, likely helping some out poverty and other difficult life situations. BOD members might argue that the work of AOP and the funds raised through the foundation work in tandem to assist youth in multiple aspects of their lives, not only helping those individuals served but also helping society. My reaction to my own hypothesis is that this is definitely possible, and although it is true that many of the former AOP students who I interviewed were stable and working towards bettering themselves, their families and their communities, I did not get the overarching sense that many of them were achieving the mainstream middle class success that perhaps the AOP BOD was hoping for. On the other hand, the research participants were not living the nightmares that might have been possible if they had not received support through AOP, although clearly it is difficult to know if participants would or would not have been successful regardless.

## **LIMITATIONS**

All research has limitations, because as an investigator makes choices about their study concerning the approach, site, participants, questions and goals of the research, invariably some aspects of the phenomena being studied and the investigation itself will be consciously or unconsciously filtered out. In this

light, I discuss the ways that the current research is uniquely limited in scope, applicability and strength, as all inquiries are.

One limitation can be found in the population sample of this study. The sample used in this study consists of those individuals who actually agreed to an interview, set up appointments to meet, participated in an interview, and allowed the interview to be recorded. No attempt at randomization was made (the purpose of the study dictated who was to be included), nor was an effort mounted to generate a control group. As a qualitative research study using a case study approach, there was never an intention of running a true experiment. These facts certainly impact the capacity of the data and the findings to generalize to the entire population of students and educational professionals in alternative education settings, at least in certain circles of researchers. Some scholars suggest that generalizations from case studies are clearly possible, but the generalizations must be considered in light of the size, diversity and strength of the research sample and analysis used (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Another limitation is the fact that the interviews from former AOP students were completed via self-report from a population of individuals who were described by AOP staff as 'prone to say what is needed to meet their own goals' (taken from meeting notes with AOP staff discussing issues and concerns with the interview protocol). With that said, this issue does not cause me much concern because: a) I worked with this population of students for many years and feel comfortable generating a positive and open rapport during one-on-one and group situations; b) I have a good sense for young people and can notice when

they are not comfortable or might not be telling the whole truth; c) I did not know any of the interviewees very well prior to their interview, allowing participants to potentially be more candid in their answers because I could do little or no harm to them (for example, by providing distasteful or uncomfortable information gleaned from their interview to former or current peers from AOP); and d) I had multiple other sources of data with which to confirm the validity of the words of the participants (i.e., student and staff focus groups, discussions with staff, and documentation). Thus, although there is a risk here (and there is always a risk with self-report), I believe much of that risk has been ameliorated.

Another limitation is that there was no observation data from the LSB, NHS, or the MOE. This lack of ground-level information collected from these different entities within the educational institution limits the strength of the findings, in that I am only able to analyze and report on the information that was available to me. Interview data was supplemented in the later interviews (with LSB, NHS and MOE employees) with documentation from various sources, however, volunteering/working at these different places or shadowing some of the participants during their regular duties may have helped to increase the validity of the findings.

An interesting issue/limitation I faced working on this project was the epistemological and political realities that manifested during and after my presentation to the AOP BOD with the final draft of the AOP program evaluation. Reflecting back on the events surrounding that part of the research, I think I was relatively naïve in my understanding of what the BOD was looking for and how

my findings and suggestions might be interpreted. Research is a social activity, and I assumed that the BOD and I had the same ideals, values and understandings of what research was and how it was best done. This lesson is an important one, as the BOD, the staff and I received little of what each of us hoped for out of the early research for this project. If I could have done it all over again, I would have focused very carefully on what the BOD was asking for, and would have made sure that they did in fact get it. My needs in terms of this dissertation could have been met much more quickly and easily if I had not tried to both 'their' research and 'my' research simultaneously. The BOD wanted a particular kind of report, and I did not understand at the time what that was or how best to give it to them. In the end I feel this limitation is about learning how to communicate with others around shared epistemological values and research outcomes.

Ultimately, I view all of these limitations (and I am sure there are more than those listed above) as learning opportunities. I have learned much about the research process, about alternative education, and the larger workings of the BC education system and its actors through this study. I made decisions on particular aspects of the research based on the literature and on my understandings of education and the research context at the time. Although there are things I would do differently in the future, I feel these limitations do not detract from the contribution this project makes to the field.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

This dissertation shows that future studies in alternative education settings are necessary to better understand the complex interactions of individuals and organizations explored briefly here in this study. As the province of British Columbia, the United States and Canada each are increasing the number of alternative programs to address the needs of various student populations (i.e., chronically truant, violent, 'problem' behaviour, special needs, gifted), understanding the impact these programs have is vital to guide theory and practice.

I will first recommend doing a follow-up study to the current work, ideally starting where this piece leaves off. If the paradoxical relationships shown to exist within the AOP alternative education context are found in other programs and in a more diverse set of educational professionals, the ways that these relationships are played out will be better understood. Further, studies that explore the pathologization of youth through deficit model thinking in and out of schools are needed to provide insight into the possibilities of school reform, ideally showing how the educational institution can become self-reflective of its language and practices.

I also recommend future research using more collaborative and participatory methods of research than the case study employed here. Participatory action research (PAR), used as a methodology either with AOP staff or with staff from different programs in the LSB catchment area, could yield results that are closer to the processes and people involved. PAR is a form of

research that invites those who otherwise would be subjects or participants of the study to become co-investigators in the research (Whyte, 1991). In this case, students and staff at alternative programs would work alongside research facilitators from the university, and together set the research agenda, identify research questions, design methods, and go through the data collection, analysis and conclusion drawing in collaboration. This form of research recognizes and attempts to address the power differentials that exist between academic investigators and those 'under study.' This kind of research is not easy, however, as the group of co-investigators (including the university researcher) need to form open processes for arriving at shared values and ways of moving forward with the research. Alternative education staff often lack the time, energy, funding and/or expertise to do solid self-evaluation with a focus on constructive improvements of their organization. Staff likely have a sense of what kind of evaluation or research they would like to be done with their program and students, and indeed may have many deeper questions about their work, but do not necessarily have the training or experience, let alone the time and energy, to do that extra work. PAR can assist those staff members who are interested in doing a research project, and may also help to undo some of the structural power relations staff enact each day, either consciously or unconsciously.

One final suggestion for future research that I see concerns student resistance. I think that an understanding of student resistance to labels, pathologization, and deficit model thinking is needed for further development of the findings and implications provided in this dissertation. One clear omission



from the work as a whole is how students reject and accept their labels, how they understand authoritative discipline in alternative schools, and what they make of the pathologization process that helps to place them in an alternative school to begin with. The acceptance and resistance to labels by students may provide an analysis that could yield forms of social activism that youth themselves can partake in. It seems like future research in this field must take into account the ways that students respond to their labels, and what ways they see the system generally and alternative education in particular needs to change.

## **CONCLUSION**

My doctoral research has attempted to provide some insight and understanding into the language and practices of the alternative education system in British Columbia, situating the paradoxical ways that educational professionals and the institution of education frame and mould youth into subordinate social positions. This dissertation has given me many lessons in how to do and not do research, how large and convoluted the field of education is, and ultimately, the ways in which each person who engages in the public educational endeavour in North America interacts with ideologies and relationships that are paradoxical and counterproductive. The ways educators and members of the society frame all youth in the society, but especially alternative students, through pathologization, labelling, and deficit model thinking, has become quite clear to me, and I wonder about our shared capacity for change. I am a bit surprised by how cynical I seem to have become, but in another sense, I also feel a growing hopefulness in terms of the potential for an

educational revolution of sorts. I also sense a growing responsibility within myself to take on some of this work, starting by a careful analysis of my practices as an educator, as a father, as a community member, and as a researcher.

Implementing Illich's or Freire's solutions to the problems I see in education are not easily or simply undertaken, and appear to be much more of a political movement than an educational movement. In writing the later parts of this dissertation with Illich in mind, I feel I am assuming a more radical stance in terms of what I should do.

I have two young boys at home now, both of who came into the world during the writing of this dissertation. In reflecting on what I have written above, and the research I have undertaken here, I have hopes that they will not experience any of the trauma, stigma, or failure in their educational pursuits that some of the AOP students went through. Knowing what I do now about education, and the power relationships that propagate so many troubles for youth, I realize the challenge I am facing as an educator and a researcher in alternative education. Do I have the strength to be disciplined in my work to the point that I can politicise myself, and become an advocate for change? Without a dissertation to write I know I will have more time to act in a capacity that supports my values more fully, and hopefully helps to bring into being new pathways of promise for my boys, and other young people who are soon to experience education.

I had no idea that I would end up at this particular place in my thinking and practice as a result of the dissertation work, and hope that I can keep the lessons

that I have learned throughout close to me in my future work. I am thankful for this chance to stretch myself in new directions, and pray that this piece will, at the very least, do no harm.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### FORMER AOP STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (FINAL)

#### Information Researcher Provides to Participant:

- I am Michael Caulkins – AOP volunteer and SFU PhD student.
- We want to know how AOP is best supporting students now, and how AOP can support students more effectively in the future.
- You can stop this interview at any time, for any reason; you can skip any question, the whole thing, whatever. You have complete control here, and there are no consequences for stopping the interview for any reason.
- Any questions before we begin?

#### Personal Background Information: (start recorder)

1. What is your date of Birth and Current Age?
2. What province and city were you raised in? Where do you live now?
3. What are some of your hobbies? What do you do for fun?
4. Do you hold any particular religious/spiritual beliefs for yourself? What are they?
5. Do you take any prescription medication? What are they and what are they for?

#### Academics:

6. What year did you come to the AOP program and how old were you?
7. What challenges were going on in your life so that you (or someone else) felt you should to come to AOP? Did AOP help with that issue(s), and if so, in what way?
8. How did you actually learn about the AOP program? Who guided you there?
9. When did you leave AOP? What was your total time at AOP? Did you receive a dogwood degree or AOP/NHS graduation certificate?
10. If you didn't graduate, what was going on that had you want to go?
11. Are you aware of any difficulties in learning that you have? Were you ever diagnosed with a Learning Disability?
12. Have you enjoyed school overall? What are your most and least enjoyable school experiences?
13. What was your attendance for school for the year before coming to AOP?
14. What are your academic strengths and weaknesses? Do you feel you were academically successful at AOP?

15. Have you continued any studies at all since leaving AOP? What are your future study plans, if any? If you do plan to continue, in what field and how far? Would a AOP college/schooling grant encourage you to go back to school?
16. Do you feel you were challenged enough academically at AOP? Physically?

**Employment Information:**

17. Do you currently have a job? What is it? How long have you been there?
18. Did you have a job before/during AOP? What were they? How long?
19. Did AOP help you get a job in any way? More confidence? Off of drugs/etc.?
20. Do you get money from a source other than employment? If so, what is it?
21. What did you volunteer for at AOP? Are you still volunteering now?

**Criminal, Drug and Health Activity:**

22. Are you currently addicted to a substance or anything else?
23. Do you currently use (drugs/alcohol/cigarettes)? Which ones (drugs)? How often/how much/how many? Did you use before/during/after AOP? How many students at AOP used (drugs/alcohol/cigarettes) while you were enrolled there?
24. What do you do to keep healthy (exercise, diet, meditation, etc.)?
25. Have you ever served time in jail or prison? Has anyone in your immediate family or circle of friends been in jail or prison? Who and what for?
26. Have you ever been arrested? If yes, when and why were you arrested?
27. Were you ever involved in criminal activity before/during/after your time at AOP that you were not arrested for?

**AOP Program:**

28. Were you enrolled in another alternative program before AOP?
29. What are the biggest differences between AOP and your other alternative/mainstream schools?
30. What is the 'message' from AOP? What are teachers/staff trying to say to you and other students?
31. Did your experience at AOP improve your capacity to trust other people?
32. Did your experience at AOP improve your capacity to build relationships with adults?
33. Did you notice how many AOP staff were around all the time? How did that make you feel?
34. Did you feel emotionally/physically safe at AOP? How/Why?
35. Did staff/students care about you at AOP?
36. What did the short weekly out-trips do for you, if anything? What did the long AOP wilderness trips do for you, if anything?
37. What was missing from AOP? What would you add/change/remove? Do you have any complaints or grudges?

38. Are you aware of if/how your parents/guardians were involved in AOP?  
What was it like for you to have AOP staff trying to have your  
parents/guardians involved?
39. What was your confidence level before/during/after AOP? Did it change in  
response to the program? If so, why?
40. What can AOP do for you now (Socials/Reunions/Career)?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **INFORMED CONSENT BY ADULT PARTICIPANTS IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

The University and those conducting this research study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well being of research participants.

Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, or if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics at hweinber@sfu.ca or by phone at 778.782.6593.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, whether there are possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

**Title:** The Boundaries of Enculturation, Autonomy and Control in Alternative Experiential Education: Narratives of Theory, Practice and Experience

**Investigator Name:** Michael Caulkins

**Investigator Department/University:** Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University

Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in the Study Information Document describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described below:

**Purpose and goals of this study:** The purpose of this study is two-fold, represented by two phases of the research. The first phase entails an evaluation for the Alternative Outdoor Program (AOP). I am contacting former and current students of the program, their parents/guardians, the staff/teachers of the program, and social/justice workers who have a relationship with the former and current students in interviews to determine the general academic success, employment status, criminal recidivism rates, drug/alcohol use, and general health practices for students in the program. This first phase will give a clearer picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and will provide a

foundation for the second phase of the research. The second phase will invite all of the same participants from the first phase (teachers, staff and students of AOP, as well as parents/guardians and social/justice workers) to engage in interviews and focus group sessions in an attempt to better understand and facilitate learning around personal autonomy, self-discipline and institutionalized educational control.

**What the participants will be required to do:** All participants will be invited to engage in an interview with the investigator (for both the first and second phases of the research) and possibly a focus group (for the second phase only). Interviews likely should only take between 30 minutes and an hour each, and the focus group meeting(s) may take between one and a half to two hours each (you may be asked to attend one or two focus group meetings). Focus groups are basically facilitated group discussions around the topics raised in the interviews (these will only occur during the second phase of the research). Some participant observation will be conducted, which essentially means the researcher will be taking notes of what they see and hear during the interviews, focus groups, and at other times (like on out-trip days at AOP). Participants will not be required to do any physical activity of any kind for this research.

**Risks to the participant, third parties or society:** Although some participants may feel somewhat uncomfortable at times reviewing and sharing some aspects of their experiences related to AOP (a student's criminal and drug/alcohol activity, for example), the atmosphere of the interviews and focus groups will be one of trust, acceptance and support. Outside of this small possibility, there are no risks to the participants of the study. Further, there are no risks to third parties or to society as a whole.

**Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge:** This study will likely benefit the participants directly through the reviewing and sharing of their experiences of the AOP program. I believe that sharing and discussing significant events from a program such as AOP can help the teaching staff, students, parents/guardians and social/justice workers to realize insights not only about themselves and the program, but also about how personal and institutional control play out in alternative educational settings. This new knowledge may also be very useful for researchers and practitioners of experiential and alternative education. Perhaps most concretely, the second phase of the research will be consciously seeking strategic improvements in the program, particularly through group engagement about specific concerns, strengths, and weaknesses.

**Statement of confidentiality:** The data of this study will maintain confidentiality of your name and the contributions you have made to the extent allowed by the law. All data collected for this study will be kept confidential, unless a participant discusses an issue (such as child abuse) that falls under mandatory reporting laws. All physical data sets (both paper and electronic copies) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Dr. Sean Blenkinsop (Faculty of Education,



Simon Fraser University) for 5 years. After this time, all physical data sets will be erased and/or destroyed.

**Interview of employees about their company or agency:** NONE

**Inclusion of names of participants in reports of the study:** NONE

**Contact of participants at a future time or use of the data in other studies:** It is possible that AOP may attempt to contact you at some point in the future regarding this study or a future study in order to continue their efforts to improve the program.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics: Director, Office of Research Ethics, 8888 University Drive, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada, V5A 1S6, 778.782.3447; email: dore@sfu.ca

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting: Michael Caulkins (mcaulkin@sfu.ca, 604.456.0123), and/or Sean Blenkinsop (sblenkin@sfu.ca, 778.782.5784).

**I understand the risks and contributions of my participation in this study and agree to participate:**

(The participant and witness shall fill in this area. Please print legibly)

Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_ First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date (use MM/DD/YYYY): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Contact Information: (address, phone, email)

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Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

May we contact you at a future time/use this data in other studies? (circle one):

YES            NO

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR AOP THERAPIST FOR THE GRADE 10 CLASSROOM**

- What is the over-arching/ultimate goal of AOP? Why does the program exist?
- How important are the outdoor trips to your program, and how do they support the goals of AOP? Do the short/long trips hold different benefits/challenges?
  - Talk to me about the outdoor trips and how it helps students
- Students spoke about how deeply involved in their lives staff were. Why do staff get so involved with students? Why do staff do so much extra work for students?
  - What is the impact on staff to be so involved (calling, picking them, taking personal time, etc.)? Is there burnout?
  - Tell me about the working environment at AOP for staff in terms of this involvement...
  - Why do you work at AOP? Why not something/somewhere else?
  - What do you learn from your students?
  - What do staff believe about the young people at AOP in terms of their abilities?
    - How do staff approach students (on the continuum between fixing weaknesses/building strengths)
  - What are the expectations on students:
    - Academically
    - Physically
    - Socially
- Most students I interviewed made comments about how AOP felt like a family to them. Why would students use this metaphor? Do you cultivate that idea at AOP?
- Most students spoke about the other therapist (G11/12 students only) and the therapy as being very important to the program. Why do you think they said this?
  - Talk to me about why the therapy is so important...
- Some academic literature out there about the way that young people get labeled as 'at-risk' for failure, or 'behavior problem', or 'delinquent'. Many people are critical of the way young people are portrayed (negatively, pathologized, deficit-focus). In my interviews with the young people who had been through AOP, none of them referred to themselves as any of these things (but the foundation is called AOP Foundation). Even just ending up at a program like AOP might make students feel like they are carrying something wrong, carrying a disease, or a problem...that it says something about them as people.
  - How do you think this kind of labelling impacts students, if at all?

- Do you believe that most of your students have been 'labeled' (at-risk, Learning Disabled, emotionally unstable, behaviorally challenged)?
- Does AOP 'label' students or carry a label forward?
- Let's talk about the ways that students are harmed through having a large, bureaucratic education system.
  - In what ways will this system continue to create these youth?
  - How does the education system help/hinder students (I realize individuals are good and bad)...so what is it about the system we have with marks, meritocracy, racism, poverty, etc.?
  - What else (this is VERY important for today's interview)...BC Ministry? LSB? Foundation? Schools? North America vs. ?
- Emotionally speaking, what is going on with the students? What kind of emotional life have they had until now? Can you generalize at all, or are they all unique?
  - How do AOP students feel about themselves? How do they see themselves? What happens to them after AOP emotionally?
- Academically speaking, what have AOP students been through prior to AOP?
  - How are they doing now? Where are they going after AOP? What do they actually become later?
- What are the academics like at AOP?
  - are there ever lectures?
  - what kinds of sciences are students allowed to take?
  - Is it all straight from the book? How are the materials developed/presented?
  - How are the students' individual academic plans get created?
  - How are students involved in decisions around their academics?
  - For students who are especially keen (could go to university) but need the structure of AOP, how are their academic strengths supported?
  - What is the emphasis on post-secondary education in AOP? Are students tracked for their academic ability? What kind of time do the staff have to keep tabs on this kind of development/information?
- I asked AOP staff in June 2010 about what the difference was between AOP students and NHS (mainstream) students. One youth and family worker and another teacher suggested that it was simply the capacity to cope with what was going on in their lives (mental health problems, abuse, neglect, substances, crime, gangs, hunger, poverty, etc.) that separated them. In other words, students at NHS are the same/very similar to AOP students, but for whatever reason NHS students are able to manage their substance use/partying, act out less frequently/less intensely, able to deal with/cope with their home-life better than a student who ends up at AOP (or maybe rich enough to get private counseling/support for issues?).
  - What is behind a young person's ability/inability to cope (language

- used on AOP website)? Can you talk towards this idea of coping/resiliency for a minute?
- Do you or other staff consider yourselves creating more 'resilient' people?
  - Ben once told me that AOP is one of the only programs in the city that is able to enroll or handle category 'H' students.
    - How does a student get that (or any) label through the Local School Board?
    - What other categories are there?
    - What other categories do you serve?
    - Who determines what category a student is placed into? What is that process?
    - How does that extra money for specific spending categories come to AOP?
  - It seems that discipline is extremely important to your classroom atmosphere and on trips. Why is there such an emphasis on student behavior/discipline?
    - Why are punishments often physical?
  - What are the five most common mental health issues facing AOP students?
  - How are social support systems in the city serving your students, if at all (welfare, foster care, social workers, criminal justice workers, etc.)
  - Why do students stay at AOP and finish?
    - Why do students leave AOP/don't finish?
  - What kinds of pro-d happens for AOP staff? Any kind of experiential, alternative, conferences, etc.? Workshops? Training? School? Certificates?
    - Site visits to other schools?
  - What does the Drug and Alcohol counseling entail? Does it work?
  - Do students who are tardy/absent ALWAYS get a phone call or someone stopping by?
  - What is the cost of the program each year? What is the combined yearly salary for full-time staff at the program?
  - Why physical punishment (pushups, laps, etc.)? Heard from a few folks this may be illegal?
  - Are jobs required of students in the summertime? How important is current/future employment to the goals/processes of AOP?
  - Do you provide life-skills training to AOP students?
  - What is the percentage balance between academics, therapy, and physical exercise/trips? Are there major aspects of the program I'm missing?
    - For time?
    - For emphasis/importance?
  - What does AOP offer that other alternative programs don't? What came out of the conversations 1.5 years ago with main school principal, around supporting academics at AOP, supporting students to take provincials, improve graduation rates, etc.?

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR THE DISTRICT PRINCIPAL OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS FOR THE LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD

- What is the overarching goal(s) of alt. programs run through LSB? What does success look like from your office?
- What are some of the most important elements of your alt. ed. programs? What underpins the success of alt. programs in The city? Strengths/Weaknesses?
- What exactly is your role in helping alt. programs in LSB succeed?
- How many of your alt. programs are outdoor/experiential programs like AOP?
- From your perspective, what makes AOP unique, good/bad, special, interesting?
- What is your perspective on alt. students? What is your expectation of students in your programs?
- How have major ed. reforms impacted alt. schools in LSB? BC?
- What are major issues facing alt. schools at the LSB?
- What are major issues facing the institutional/bureaucratic bodies (LSB/BC Ministry of Ed.) in relation to alt. ed. programs?
- How are students given a designation of 'category R' (moderate behavior support), 'category H' (intensive behavior interventions), or 'category Q' (LD)? What is the process? Who makes the decision?
- In terms of students with moderate/severe behavioral problems (Category R and H), recent research in ed. suggests that youth who are designated as 'at-risk' or 'problem-behavior' are being held within a kind of deficit model of educational attainment. What this means is that administrators, teachers, counselors and policy makers tend to operate from 'a reduce the risks' perspective. Students are given a designation (like Category H), and then encouraged to enroll (or placed) in a program.
  - To what extent do you believe that the LSB is doing this? Do you feel that there is any move by LSB to move towards a strength-, or assets-, or promise-based model? Is this how it already operates?
- How do the mechanisms of the funding process help and hinder a student in a particular funding category (Category H, Category R, etc.)? How does money go from the Ministry, to LSB, to programs/students?
- How are alt. teachers paid from LSB?
- Can you give me a range of how much reg. teachers are paid in The city? Differences btw mainstream/alt. ed.?
- Is there any way to mix an alt. program with a trades program (I have heard from a principal that the funding of it is very difficult to arrange)
- How many alt. programs are there in LSB (15-20?)? In BC? In Canada?
- How many students are enrolled in alt. programs under LSB?
  - In BC? Canada?

- What is the difference between demand and supply for alt. ed. spots? Are there long waitlists? How many students are not served because of lack of space? Because of lack of money?
  - Are some programs more popular than others?
- Are any of your alt. programs obligatory? Are students ever forced/placed/adjudicated to enroll in a particular alt. program?
  - Do most students get to choose whether or not they go to an alt. program?
- What is the percentage of LSB alt. students who do not finish high school (percentage of drop outs)?
- What generally happens to students in LSB alt. programs who DO finish high school? Who Don't?
- How well do you feel that LSB alt. programs are meeting the needs of those students with behavioral issues?
- Are there groups of students are not being served by your office (homeless)?
- Zero tolerance ed. policies are increasing in US schools, mostly in response to school violence. For example, a student may be involved in a physical altercation, and is there for automatically suspended (or expelled). Another example, is a student bringing a 1-inch antique pocket knife to school for show and tell. Are these kinds of zero-tolerance policies happening in BC? Is this happening in Canada?
- What are the statistics in terms of representation of cultural/linguistic minorities in alt. ed.? Native youth in alt. ed?
- Can you give me some insight into other alt. high school programs (unique attributes, differences, strengths/weaknesses) in your jurisdiction?
- Which programs serve your students who need the most behavioral support?
- What do people get upset with you about the most? What do people complain about most:
  - from teachers?
  - from administrators?
  - from parents?
  - from students?
  - from Ministry?

## **APPENDIX E**

### **LIST OF PSEUDONYMS FOR READER REFERENCE**

#### School, Program and Organization Pseudonyms

Alternative Outdoor Program (AOP) – Primary program of study

North High School (NHS) – High school whose campus AOP was located upon

Local School Board (LSB) – The school board that has jurisdiction over AOP

#### Administrator and Ministry Participant Pseudonyms

Nathan Marietti – North High School Principal

Darshan Lakti – North High School Vice-Principal

Bill Schmidt – Principal of Alternative Programs for the Local School Board

Lisa Bogan – Policy Analyst in the BC Ministry of Education

Tracy Rasé – Policy Analyst in the BC Ministry of Education

#### AOP Staff Participant Pseudonyms

Ben Pilster – Head Teacher (Grade 11/12)

Vince Tilder – Head Teacher (Grade 10)

Erick Koote – Therapist (Grade 11/12)

Tom Carrick – Therapist (Grade 10)

Sagar Gumptra – Youth and Family Worker

Jackie Angler – Youth and Family Worker

#### Former AOP Student Pseudonyms

#### *Interview AND Focus Group Participants*

Chelsea Klein

Joanie Lee

Alex Ravinsky

Mark Hao

George Valencia

Colin Silverman

Pat Melville

#### *Interview-Only Participants*

Matt Walker

Jean Fraser

Jeremy Reid

Arielle Bower

Heather Gouseman

Joey Chen

Stephanie Dorst

Autumn Pemara  
Sattam Rumar  
Melissa Greenley  
Trina Schulev  
Casey Wen  
Jason Choi